

CUTTING CHILLS



WILL COUPER

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William Couper

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Adventures with Lovecraft

The Pervading Outsider

Without sight surroundings are but abstractions. Without mind there can be no comprehension or definition. In a vista with no landscape these thoughts were contradicted, shattered in unspeakable ways by things for which the meaning of consciousness is multi-layered and far more complex than the simplistic musings of the mortal mind. Here, where space is a concept as shallow as the thinking of a bacterium, inscrutable tides crash and retreat as the endless beating of the universe's heart pounds in tandem with them.

A ring of blurs. A sound that seems to connect rhythmically to the shifting ring of indistinct shapes, a dance that is at once repulsive and mesmerising; graceless and

lumpen with impossible physiology that is locked with the music as surely as life is with time. Power exudes from these warped shapes, god-like in its magnitude and enormity, enough to snuff out galaxies and halt the rotation of black holes. Time is nothing to entities of such power, yet for all their might and unfathomable senses, all that matters to them is the music and the dancing, the universe is nothing to them for they will outlive a thousand universes and care nothing for any of them.

These primal shapes are here by command, locked in place by physical laws stronger than Einsteinian or Newtonian theories, laws rooted in more than a single plane of reality and complex enough to crush any one in a gravity of shifting phenomena. Any of their gestures could leave great tracts of ruined stars, it was true, but something far stronger compels their motions, holds them in thrall. All this power is meaningless in the face of such crushing, unwavering will.

So they dance and caper in spaces immeasurable except by the mad. As epochs pass like slivers of a second they move quicker than light, in ways that would drive sanity from even the most stalwart human mind: a titan fairy ring that ceaselessly whirls in wild, constant orbit – hypnotised by the monotonous bleat of an unidentified piping instrument.

And sitting in the centre of this ring of crazed half unseen shapes, transfixed and wild, sits a formless form. This crazed thing as huge as a million universes and tinier than the smallest parts of an atom, more minute yet than the guessed at strings that are theorised to make up everything, a thing that is clearly incapable of sight or thought, writhes and quivers to this strange thin music, enslaved to it but also possessing enormous power of its own and ruling over the phantasmal dancers around it. That a creature, that is at once idiotic and gives off reality altering powers in waves of crackling vividness, is extant should be impossible. Yet it exists, somewhere distant and close enough for its easy reach.

Too easy. A great whirl of a mountainous appendage, the flesh – or whatever material it is made of – glittering and iridescent with time and corruptions not to be imagined or understood, lashes out over the heads of its court. The movement should be discordant with the nerve-drilling music, but seems to fit perfectly. A movement that spans and could engulf galaxies performed with a snake-quick instinctual lack of anger, strikes out, uncoiling in a crushing blow towards its screaming victim.

* * *

Callum was awakened by his own shrill scream. It was a sound he thought his vocal chords were incapable of making and it chilled him with the mindless fear that it described.

He reached out and touched the mattress next to him. Thankfully the other side of the bed was empty, as Catherine had gone home last night. He would have to phone her later to apologise.

The strangeness of the dream and the insistent piping clung to him as he swung out of the bed. Exact details of the dream, however, evaded him and the more he tried to pin them down, the more elusive they became. And more frightening. He couldn't help feeling that something monumental, significant, had taken place in his sleep but what that could be was beyond him.

He was glad that Catherine hadn't heard his scream. He was almost glad that she had left in anger last night, as he wouldn't have been able to explain why he was still shivering as he sat on the edge of the bed, or why he was so afraid to move. A fundamental part of his mind held him in place and made sure he made no move, however the instincts that had come into play were out of Callum's understanding.

He shook himself.

As he went about his morning routine he pondered the argument he and Catherine had the night before. It was the same one that

cropped up every couple of months, about that lack of ambition he displayed. Catherine found it offensive that he was almost aggressive in his tenacity to stay working in a shop, while she worked and persevered to become an actress.

Her anger was incomprehensible to him. What business was it of hers if he stayed in a shop? He was happy with his lot. She claimed to love him, so it should be that she accepted him for what he was, and not try to thrust ambition upon him and make it stick. That was unfair and something he would never dream of doing to her. He liked his life simple, with pleasures like a few drinks at the weekend, the odd smoke of hash, taking ecstasy every couple of months, and going out to pubs and clubs. He wanted nothing spectacular. He liked his mundane life, and he wished Catherine could understand that.

There was the problem: she was so stubborn and blinkered that she was blind to this. To her way of thinking everyone should have this drive to better themselves, and she thought it contemptible, even criminal, if they didn't develop the talents they had and utilise them to the maximum. It was impossible to consider in her worldview that some people were not that special, that the talents they possessed ran only as far as living life from day to day. It was the way the world worked from what Callum had experienced, that some people never considered

rising above the standard in which they lived, because they couldn't.

Certainly, he would concede everyone had dreams and fantasies, but for the most part they were impossible to fulfil. Take him as an example. His dream of becoming a world-class tennis player went out of the window as soon as he hit puberty when he realised just how alluring the opposite sex was. He had no bitterness about this, as it was the way the world worked for the majority of the population.

This argument was always guaranteed to become heated and last night it had exploded worse than it had for over a year. Insults had been exchanged and hurtful things had been said. In a whirlwind of tears and screams that left Callum stunned, Catherine was out of the door, into her car and away. Exhausted, he had fallen into bed.

As he left his flat now, the vestiges of the strange dream were swept away by the distinct regret that he had hurt Catherine's feelings. He always saw her side to this argument. It just angered him that she was incapable of seeing his point of view. Her lack of compromise could be endearing sometimes, however in the case of this constant argument it was irksome. He should let her go on with a diatribe and allow the fight to die before it began, yet he always found that she drew it out of him like a

poison. One of these times he would stay silent.

Coming out of the building, he found that the air was warm and humid. The sun's light poking over the roofs of the Glasgow streets glinted and dazzled off the windows of the higher buildings was more annoyance than boon. He looked at his watch, plenty of time to get to work.

The summer had been fickle, veering from scorching days that should be spent lazing and drinking iced drinks, to days so wet and miserable that getting out of bed was almost more than he could manage. There had been a horrendous downpour yesterday afternoon, and the streets were still wet and puddled from the incredible deluge.

The weather had been quite frightening as he recalled. He had been indoors in the large shop in which he worked all day and had watched the fat drops of rain slash down out of the sky, careen away from the windows in a thousand smashed crystal globules, and form deep pools and rivers in the street in a way he'd never seen before. The people he worked with were jittery too, sensing the same weirdness in the air that he did, but not daring to tell anyone what they felt for fear of being ridiculed.

Some people had come in off the street, not to shop, but to shelter in the doorway. One of the security guards was about to move the people

on and stopped. One of the women turned and spoke to him with rapid fearfulness, then pointed to the sky. The man had paled and looked sick, and allowed the small group to crowd in the doorway without any further harassment until the rain stopped.

Callum was curious about what could be so fearful that it made the security man change his mind about putting the people back out on the street. His curiosity deepened when he saw that even more people huddled in other doorways, looking up at the sky with worried expressions on their faces. Only a few souls walked the street, needing to get to places urgently and they hurried along through the downpour, eyes fixed on the pavement, wanting to look at the sky but too afraid to do so.

Callum had asked a co-worker what was going on. The man looked blank and shrugged, going back to stocking the shelves with the latest CDs. He decided not to press anyone else, as his co-workers were too nervous of the oppressive atmosphere the storm engendered and the people taking shelter in the doorway were too stunned by the view of the sky to give a rational answer.

It was, as fortune would have it, short lived. The relentless, pounding shower stopped all of a sudden after a few minutes. The feeling of fear vanished with it; he and everyone around him relaxed. Even the worried pedestrians who

had been so affected by the look of the sky shook themselves as though coming out of a collective trance and went off without another word, dispersing into the street among the other shoppers and commuters with neither fear nor hesitation.

This made Callum uneasy; it seemed that he was the only one and no one else passed comment about the phenomenon. As though nothing had happened. He was beginning to wonder if anything *had* happened.

As perplexing as it was, he too had felt the strangeness of that storm vanish as the day passed and had, to his great surprise, forgotten it until just a few moments ago. As though his mind had pushed it aside, buried it quick and buried it deep, something to be forgotten then brought back into his consciousness by a trigger he was heretofore unaware of.

All this tumbled through his mind in a wild, confusing mass of contradictions and speculations bordering on superstition, until he was roused from his reverie by the sudden harsh sounding of a car horn. In his mind's dazed meandering Callum had stepped out onto the road and only the quick thinking of a very annoyed driver had stopped him from being hurt by the oncoming vehicle. The red-faced man, who was clearly more shaken than Callum poked his head out of the driver's side window and called him a prick. Callum raised his hands

in surrender and called back an apology as the car accelerated away, the driver giving him a final acidic glower before returning his attention to the road ahead.

Callum hurried to the pavement at the other side of the road, his heart pounding with alarming vigour, pulling the air from his lungs. The delayed realisation that he had almost been killed crippled him. He leaned up against a building, to gulp great gasps of air.

That had never happened to him before. He was blasé about crossing busy roads in the city, though normally he would be paying at least some kind of attention to what was coming and going on. He could not remember ever being so distracted that he paid no attention to the traffic.

A worry, but maybe nothing more than a small lapse. He couldn't expect to have every morning be exactly the same every time. Even though that had been the case for the past four years, today was a bit different, and he was out of sorts in a way he had never been in that time or in any time in his life. It was an odd thing to admit even to himself, yet there was no denying that he was feeling different today.

Perhaps he could have explained it away by thinking it was the violence of the fight he'd had with Catherine the night before. It was comforting in its way, and mundane. It was lame and unconvincing. And it was wrong.

What it really came down to was that prickly feeling across his scalp that scuttled its way down his spine with hairy, cold, chitinous legs to his lower back and scrabbled there, forming a freezing lump that made his muscles twitch; then rushed back up to the base of skull, making him want to clench his jaw.

He was being watched.

Looking up and down the street revealed no one who was taking an active interest in him. All those who had stared at the scene with him and the driver had gone about their business, and the people on the street right now were too intent on getting where they were going to pay any attention to this young man in the uniform of a large chain of shops as he slowly walked along the street. There was no explanation, other than some low-level paranoia, as to why he would feel such an oppressive sensation. Knowing the irrationality of it didn't make the feeling go away. If anything it made him more afraid.

The observed feeling clung to him all the way to the shop. The fearfulness he felt grew the whole time, until, by the time he had come to the entrance of his workplace, he was making a conscious effort not to run. Through the fear was a feeling of deep embarrassment at his irrational behaviour that served to fuel this chilling sensation.

All through the day that fear stayed with him, and although the sensation lessened as the hours went by, he took furtive glances out of the main entrance of the shop at every chance he got to try and glimpse the source of this fear. Of course he saw nothing, and by the end of the day this small trip into the land of the paranoid was over.

* * *

When he got home that night, he felt apprehensive. He wondered if Catherine would come around for a re-enactment of the evening before.

He ate. He sat and watched the television. He considered phoning Catherine to see if her mood had improved any, and decided against it. He would let her come around in her own time. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts tonight.

He went to bed.

As he lay there, staring up at the ceiling, he was reconsidering his decision not to phone Catherine. He loved her – he really did – and all the small things she did. She could be stubborn and irrational, but the way she did a little dance as she made breakfast, the way her nose crinkled with such cuteness when she smiled, and the fact that she loved him with such devotion made those annoying quirks

seem minor. The blazing rows still hurt, but when they were with someone who understood him so well and knew what he wanted and all he wanted was to make her happy, how could he give serious consideration to not speaking to her?

The thought to pick up the telephone and dial Catherine's number was on his mind when his eyes closed and he fell hard into a very deep sleep. It felt like being dragged down into a pit.

* * *

It was colder than he had ever experienced. The air had teeth of serrated ice and it howled through the strange corridor. Yet the freezing air was nothing more than a piece of knowledge, he was unaware of any feeling of discomfort. The frigid touch of the air wasn't reaching him. He still shivered.

He was alone here. There had been others, but they were gone, taken in some namelessly horrible way that his mind refused to linger upon. He was afraid.

The place was alien and ancient to a terrifying degree. The architecture was strange and impossible to understand except by those who had created it. Archways dominated the structure and this was as much as he was able to rationalise, as the geometry of the space defied his education and made him feel small

and insignificant. The massive stones seemed to be perched in ways that, in his limited experience of physics, should have been impossible, yet here they were, after countless aeons, without moving other than from the most extreme of geological duress.

The wall carvings gave him the greatest fright, the pictograms he refused to look at, as he understood that they had some truth to impart that would freeze him as surely as that bitter wind. He had no memory of doing so, but he was certain he had followed the line of marching pictures to their conclusion and had been shocked to his soul at what they spoke of, so he made a point of averting his gaze where the meagre light carved through the thick gloom to reveal even a portion of those blasphemous carvings.

He stood at a large intersection. He looked down at his feet and saw a trail of torn scraps of white paper leading away in two directions. He had to follow them: but in which direction? As hard as he tried, he couldn't remember from which direction he had come.

As he stared at the scraps of paper, something occurred to him. If there was such a terrific, frigid gale, why weren't these light pieces of paper being tossed and churned in vortices of moving air? As it was they lay perfectly still on the smooth floor, there was not so much as a

flutter from them. Something else must be making that horrendous noise.

Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw it. At the end of a long corridor there was something churning. From this distance it looked like a liquid with a vague green flickering luminescence, as though a powerful electric current was being passed through its solid bulk, which made the gloom dance. The ooze was moving at an alarming rate straight for him and taking up the whole breadth of the corridor as it did so.

The bubbling surface of the liquid came closer, forced, seemingly, by a tremendous power deep within the building's heart. An inexorable advance with impetus of inhuman energy and unnatural vitality was bearing down on him, as he stood there rapt by fear and awe, unable to quite believe or understand what he was seeing.

His terror and confusion blocked off the scream that should have come when he saw that it wasn't bubbles that were forming and being reclaimed on the dark surface of the great protean mass. The bulging, sliding surface of the gargantuan thing was stippling with green eyes that opened and then either burst like giant boils or sank out of sight into the roiling dark surface. He saw mouths and other openings form too; and were equally as temporary as the hideous formations of eyes.

The toothy maws opened like slashes on the surface of this creature, howled in the way he had heard or tittered in a strange fashion, then sealed up and be replaced by froths of blank green eyes or sprout antennae or create any number of sensory organs that he was ill equipped to identify. He doubted he would even want to identify the mockeries of nature that bubbled from the skin of the monstrosity that thundered ever closer to him.

It was obvious he should run. The tiny prey-animal part of his mind frantically demanded it, but he was rooted there, watching as an incomprehensible doom slapped and lurched at him. This thing he had no name for was thundering towards him, howling in a way that ground a chill into every corner of his being and all he could do was stare in detached fascination.

The writhing, rippling wall of flesh squeezed its way along the corridor with no more difficulty than a sprinter on a hundred-metre race. There was nothing in its way to halt its progress; any lumps of debris in the way were engulfed by the sliding elastic horror without slowing it down.

A howl, louder and longer than any it had emitted so far signalled that it was almost upon him and it was confident of its victory. He, too, knew that it would have him. It could do

whatever it intended and it would be impossible for him to fight it.

Then it stopped.

It was ten feet away from him, but wasn't moving any further. The whole thing simply ceased to move forward. He could feel the crushing tonnage of its mass, even from this distance, as a palpable sensation. The hideous sensory organs continued to appear and disappear on its surface, yet it remained still. One of the strange antenna-like growths sprouted and its tip was an inch shy from touching the top of his head, before being pulled back into the mass. That was the closest it came to him and he was both glad and sickened.

He stared, wondering why it hadn't struck whatever deathblow it had planned. The almost liquid flesh of the creature went through nauseating changes without the thing pushing forward.

It shivered. The whole wall of sickening biological mass rippled, making the ever-changing surface contort and vibrate in the most obscene manner, and distort the created eyes and openings. The wet internal sounds caused by the spasm were repulsive enough to make him gag in response.

The retreat, when it came, was halting and baffling in equal measure. It was less than two

feet, but perceptible. It was enough to convey one thing: fear.

Another gelatinous ripple through the gigantic mass and another, larger movement back the way it came. It rumbled. Whatever organs it created inside its body made a sound like tectonic plates grinding, the sound of a frightened animal reacting to something that was a danger to it.

That was when he felt it. There was another presence close by. It wasn't large in the normal sense of the word, yet it gave off seething power in greasy concentric waves that left a tinny taste in his mouth.

The fear that he had felt since coming here had been increasing incredibly with every new revelation – even though some of these revelations felt like things he already knew – jumped to a new plateau of dizzying terror. This alien place was occupied by something even more hideous and powerful than the slurping, howling, tittering thing that had squeezed its way up the corridor to confront him. While that beast was incomprehensible to him, he knew that it was a product of this plane of existence. This new presence was from, not only a different world, but from a different dimension with physical laws beyond his ability to comprehend.

He turned away from the beast whose retreat was becoming more rapid and desperate.

Along the opposing corridor, and difficult to see in the slabs of gloom resting there like great black geometric blocks from a fallen tower of shadow, was the form of a man. There was nothing remarkable about his appearance; he was of average height and build. He was swarthy, Arabian perhaps, unusual in such a cold clime although not particularly strange. The waves of power came from him and it was like staring into a raging inferno, Callum could imagine if he stared at this individual for too long, his skin and flesh would be burned away and the bones beneath would be left calcified into a bizarre, scorched statue.

He felt a sickening pang of recognition, but from where it was impossible to tell.

The stranger was watching him, and it was clear that he watched with no small measure of amusement – watching an ant stand before an articulated lorry, staring up at its own demise. Finding it all the more titillating because he knew this ant understood such a concept and was frightened by it.

Callum gaped at this shadowed man. The man took a step towards him. There was nowhere to go. If the gigantic beast that had been so close to destroying him was afraid of this man, what hope was there for someone such as him who was small and puny and mortal?

The stranger took another step forward. In the dark skin of his face a slash appeared. The teeth behind the thin lips looked like polished ivory. The smile was cruel and wise in the most obscene and impossible of ways.

This man's footsteps echoed and rang through the stone corridor. His movement was even more sinister and threatening than the howling wind that he could hear coming from outside. That power pushed forward from the figure, distorting reality, making the formerly solid stones of this construction seem liquid. As he moved past them they appeared to writhe as though in the grip of some inhumanly hellish torment. But only for as long as the man stood close to them.

The dark man raised his arm. His eyes glinted through the darkness, catching light from a source that was purely internal. Long, thin fingers unfurled from the palm to reach out. The man was laughing now.

"Mine," he said.

* * *

Callum tumbled out of the bed, kicking and scrabbling away along the floor. He was gasping, unable to even utter the scream that burgeoned in his chest. His back bumped into the wall and he sat there in his boxer shorts, staring at the twisted sheets on his bed. He saw

in them echoes of the impossible architecture of his dream.

He could still see the cold, ancient glow of the dark man's eyes.

Getting to his feet, he blundered into the bathroom, bumping off the walls and doorframes. Before he could do anything more he was hunched over the toilet, heaving stinking green bile into it. His stomach muscles were cramped and sore by the time he stopped and he lay on the chilled floor with no more energy.

By the time he had recovered and showered, he realised it was past time he was going to work. The acidic taste of vomit cut through the clean mint flavour of toothpaste.

Without having breakfast he ran out of the door. It was gloomier than the day before and there was the feeling of oppression in the air, as if the clouds had become lead weights pressing down on the street below. As though he was being watched again.

Again? He hadn't even established if he had been watched the day before. The feeling was the same, and it struck him the moment he stepped out of the building into the damp morning air. It was a conviction now, and unshakeable, that there was some intent gaze trained upon him going about his normal routine. He felt like a zoo animal, or a

laboratory experiment, or a plaything for someone's amusement.

The feeling of the dream crashed into him, bursting shots of ice through his blood and flesh. A chill that was part the remembrance of an Arctic frigidity he had never felt in his waking life, and the knowledge that something of cosmic scale had looked upon him with dismissive contempt.

He was warier of the traffic today, and that took the edge from the cold that was settling in his mind that threatened to numb him and rip right through to a core of atavistic terror so foul and searing that he would be lost forever in a maze of wild madness.

When he got into work his colleagues were regarding him in the strangest way. His supervisor took him aside, with a look of professional concern.

His supervisor asked if he was all right. Callum, confused by the man's quiet question, replied that he was fine. It was then that the man said something so peculiar that Callum almost laughed. He instructed Callum to get out of the wet clothes he was wearing.

Callum stared at the supervisor.

Looking down at himself, Callum saw that, indeed, he was dripping wet. He felt his head and found that his hair was plastered down to the side of his face as though he had been caught in a tremendous down pour. There was

a steady plip-plip from the drops that hit the floor coming from his head, arms, and hands.

He checked his watch. He had lost three hours.

His supervisor fixed him with what he seemed to think was a fatherly gaze and suggested that Callum should go home. Callum insisted that he was fine, even as he knew he was anything but. The supervisor, still speaking as sympathetically as he could, told Callum that if he felt better tomorrow he should come in. And only if he was one hundred percent certain.

Callum was about to refuse the offer, when he realised it wasn't a request, and a security man was standing behind him ready to escort him from the premises. The man seemed reluctant to get too close to Callum and demurred from answering any of his questions. Callum's mind was racing with those questions and it looked like he would receive no answers. As he walked with the security man to the exit, heads turned to him that turned away as soon as he tried to make eye contact. There was the suggestion of whispering and furtive comment from his colleagues.

Out in the street again, it was bright and sunny, and the ground was awash. There had been another torrential downpour, and he knew he had run out into it. He had no memory of

doing such a thing, but the evidence was his own soaking form. He wanted to cry.

In a state of nervous watchfulness, he trudged back home, aware more acutely than earlier of the sensation that a hidden observer had him locked in a malevolent gaze. He shrank within himself, hoping somehow, that if he were to hunch and slouch enough he would become smaller and harder to see. It didn't work, and compounded the feeling.

Only when he was indoors, with the door and windows locked and the curtains drawn did he feel that dreadful sensation diminish to a point that he felt he could look out at the streets. He looked out and there was no one to be seen who was bothered enough to look up at his second floor flat.

Later that night the phone rang. It was Catherine; he was relieved to hear her voice and he apologised for the way he had treated her the other night. She apologised too, saying that she had been just as much to blame. They talked of other things for a while, although Callum neglected to mention his curious memory lapse of the morning, and they arranged to meet the next night. He felt soothed.

* * *

The sky was green and a huge eye glared down at him from the emerald clouds. Giant raindrops hit with stinging force on his skin, in his mouth and in his eyes. Viscous water soaked into his clothes through to his skin and glued the fabric to it.

People around him avoided looking at him, avoided looking at the sky and either clustered into what shelter they could or rushed, splashing through the sodden street, to wherever they wanted to go as though hunted by something terrifying beyond comprehension.

Callum felt no fear. He felt exultant. He felt alive. The strange water was baptising him, anointing him with its poisoned touch. He laughed as the toxic liquid burned his eyes, chapped his lips, embittered his tongue and scabbed his nostrils. He had waited for this for longer than his life.

“Iä! Iä! Shub-Niggurath! T’ikjusty opd’c’ift, fhtagn Huyr, klf’aq! Nyarlathotep! Bini’ast y’cklt zjhi! Iä! Iä! Nyarlathotep! Nyarlathotep!” He screamed to the sky in a gurgling voice.

He felt to his knees in the water that had collected and choked the drains and laughed harder and harsher at the sky above.

* * *

He was still laughing when he awoke. His exhortations were so forceful that he was shaking with the effort of them and his throat was raw and painful. So raw was his throat that there was the coppery taste of blood rising to his mouth. And he couldn't stop. As terrified and bewildered as he was, he was unable to halt the sound of his infernal and perverse amusement. Tears streamed down his face because of the ripping pain in his throat and the spasms of his intercostals and diaphragm as they contracted harshly to push more ragged air from his lungs.

It was a task to get out from his bed to walk on weakened legs to the bathroom, where he ran the cold water in the shower and jumped under the spray without taking his boxer shorts off. The touch of icy water made him gasp and stopped his hysterical laughing fit.

As he shuddered and moaned under the spray, he felt the creeping tendrils of fear steal over him. Someone was watching. He whipped his cold and soaking head around and saw that there was no foundation to his feeling of being watched. His shivers were wracking him with their strength now and with a palsied hand he turned on the hot water. It took forever for the warmer spray to melt the ice that he had implanted in his body by standing under the cold water, but by tiny increments, he felt heat return to his extremities, yet at his centre there

was a core of freezing hard-packed fear that no physical remedy could fix.

Wearing the same clothes that were damp from the day before, he wandered into work late, much to his supervisor's annoyance and his colleagues' uneasiness. There were some questions about his well-being which he waved away with irritation. He would be better if people stopped asking him how he was feeling.

It was an hour later when it all came undone, when the customer asked him for assistance as he was filling a display. He stared at the woman, and found he didn't recognise her as a human, there was something unnatural about the way her jaw moved and her facial muscles twitched. There was something in her eyes that he had to get, and, as he thought these things, she recognised his interest and was terrified by it, and began to edge away from him.

She babbled and tried to reason with him. The language she used was alien and unfamiliar to him, studded with primal syllables and whirling meaning and all unfathomable to him. Her eyes glittered; if he got to those, understanding would come. Their allure increased and he had to have them, dripping with whatever passed for this she-creature's blood. He smiled.

As he started to reach for her powerful arms locked around his body, pinning his arms to his sides. The woman was escorted away by the

manager, while Callum's supervisor told him to get out and not to bother returning.

Through the outrage and confusion, Callum found that all he could do was smile and it metamorphosed into a terrible laugh, as insane as the one that woke him today, but now with a measure of control. He laughed long and loud, taking his jacket before leaving the shop, with puzzled staff and customers watching him go.

Sweat trickled down his body, as the fresh sprouts of fear formed. The laughter subsided as he came closer to his home and the feeling of being watched ambushed him with almost physical force.

Then he saw the old tramp standing at the corner of the street, his long tattered coat flapping and thin white hair whirling in the breeze. At any other time Callum would have dismissed the man without a second thought, but today he was almost searching for things that were wrong, that seemed out of place, and this old man was out of place; his smile of cracked brown and black teeth was knowing, and his eyes glinted with cold feral light that could have travelled the reaches of the universe to find Callum. He knew this gaze and he had seen those eyes.

He ran. A croak of shouted speech and a peel of bronchial laughter followed Callum as he dashed – dodging startled pedestrians and motorists as he sprinted past – the last few

hundred yards to his front door. He expected the old man to be waiting for him inside the house, but to his relief there was no one waiting inside for him.

The weight of what had happened today fell onto him and he crumpled into a ball onto his couch. He had no job and some madness was taking him over. This mania was forcing its way into his mind and forcing out what he thought to be normal, *real*. The woman had been nothing but that, a normal woman who wanted help in finding a particular record. He saw something in her face, in her mannerisms that suggested she was something other than human.

He had to get help. He had to find the answer to this thing that was threatening overrun his life.

Nyarlahotep that was the key. Of the hideous words he had gurgled in his dream that, and Shub-Niggurath seemed to hold greatest import – they were names. Of what they were names, he had no idea, yet even outside of the world created in his deluded sleeping fantasy the names Nyarlahotep and Shub-Niggurath both conveyed a suggestion of power, majesty and blasphemous awe. He had to find out if they meant anything.

With the curtain drawn over the windows, he ensconced himself in his bedroom. He sat at his PC and switched it on. All the while, as it

went through the boot-up sequence, he wondered if the tattered figure in the stained coat was watching his window from the street, and if those eyes could see what he was doing.

Let him see.

Through this unreasoning defiance, Callum felt the first stirrings of doubt and, with them, vague fear. Why was he so fierce in his determination to defy the old man? Why was the old man so significant that he so felt that it was necessary to defy him? He had only seen him once and that had been a swift impression. But the impression had been enough to convey a sense of cosmic magnitude and terrible presence.

Perhaps it was all some hitherto unforeseen psychosis that had been dwelling within him, all it had taken was some strange dreams to dredge its spectre up to haunt his mind. If that were the case, then the old man was no more than a vagrant, a moneyless vagabond with a drink or drug problem and Callum was simply fixating upon him in the throes of an oncoming bout of paranoid schizophrenia, and this search on the internet would serve to confirm that. He would seek out a doctor right away in such a case, and even go so far as to have himself put in hospital if that were necessary.

He was getting ahead of himself and he clicked the icon that would open the internet explorer. Once there he went to a popular

search engine and, after a moment of debate, typed in the word 'Nyarlahotep'. His finger hovered over the enter key as he was overcome by the most sickening and paralysing dread. It was the fear of what he may find in this search; and of what he might not find that stayed his hand for that time.

His finger descended. The screen went blank as the references in the server were searched and collated in conjunction with his computer. In a flash he was facing a list of web addresses. The first on that list was called 'Nyarlahotep in the Necronomicon'.

After an hour he had read about the terrible book called the *Necronomicon* written by a mad Arabian poet-magician called Abd al-Azrad, and all of the mind-shattering things that it spoke of, and of its myriad translations and editions. There were other books, other repositories of hideous knowledge, the *Vermis Mysteries*, the *Liber Ivonis* or *Book of Eibon*, the *Unausprechlichen Kulten*, the *G'harne Fragments* and countless others as hideous, written down the ages.

And what connected each of these horrendous books, besides their grisly subject matter, was that each, according to those who created the websites, held mention of three deities. These three gods of crushing evil and maddening terror, whose reign had gone on for longer than the human race, and would go on far into

eternity when humanity was passed from memory were called Azathoth, Nyarlathotep and Shub-Niggurath.

This revelation should have made Callum recoil in terror, and he did have to struggle with the urge to throw the monitor onto the floor and smash the PC to bits when he was confronted by this knowledge. Instead he delved on, wanting to know more about these things and what they were.

None of the websites he found would go into specifics about what was written in these tomes, but they hinted that secrets of mathematics, of parapsychology, and of mysticism resided in them all. Some mentioned historical incidents that they claimed proved what was in these books were true, the burning of a town called Innsmouth, an ill-fated Antarctic expedition (something that gave him a thrill of fear as though he were familiar with the circumstances), blasted farmland in the backwoods of New England where nothing grows, of the Plateau of Leng and of Kadath. All places and incidents where this science-magic, described by the students of the forbidden books, made an impact or still affected and hidden from common people for fear of what might happen if these secrets stopped being secret.

He would have continued hopping from link to link, learning more wonders and terrors, but

he was interrupted by the telephone ringing. He looked at the time and, in a dark fuzzy way, he realised he was going to be late for his date with Catherine. He answered the telephone and assured Catherine that he would be there to meet her on time.

He showered and changed and left the house twenty minutes later.

Upon seeing him Catherine grimaced, mentioning how terrible he looked. He tried to shrug off the comment with a light-hearted reply; however he was disturbed that she was able to tell that he was feeling less than one hundred percent. He thought he looked fine when he glanced at himself in the mirror before leaving. Later in the evening he took another look at his reflection in the toilets of the restaurant and saw an apparition with wild, dark-rimmed eyes staring back at him.

The night was, if not a disaster, then it was one of the least enjoyable nights he had spent with Catherine without arguing with her. He found that he was uninterested in anything she said, even when he tried to feign interest she commented on how distracted he seemed. His excuse was that he was having trouble sleeping and this satisfied her.

He refrained from mentioning that he was now jobless. He also gave no indication of his suspicions about his mental health. These were things that he would try to deal with on his own

at first and bring her into confidence when there was no other choice. Telling her these things now would alternately anger and worry her without due cause, as he foresaw no problems finding new employment and he was uncertain if he was truly on the verge of dementia.

When she asked if he wanted to spend the night in her house, he declined, his excuse being that he wouldn't want to keep her awake with his tossing and turning. This elicited a troubled expression from her, but she made no argument and they went their separate ways.

He went home, fearing what dreams would await him in the depths of the night.

* * *

The next morning he awoke refreshed from an undisturbed sleep. He should have been pleased, but the dreamless night left him more disconcerted than before. There was a disturbing emptiness to the night that was as unnatural as it was unexpected. He felt as though something was taken from him, while at the same time being relieved that the hideous images of the previous nights were absent.

There was little time to consider any of this as he hurried to get to the job centre to begin his search for new employment. In hindsight he should have started that while he was on the

internet the night before, instead of fuelling the odd notions that had been working on driving him to question his sanity in the past few days. Yet, even as he knew that these morbid excavations through strange information were doing a certain amount of harm to his thought processes, he found it impossible to dismiss or repulse the disgusting urge to go back and continue delving.

This all distracted him through his walk to, and his time in, the unemployment office, where he received forms and made desultory searches for somewhere new to work.

It wasn't until he was on his way back home that he noticed the tattered old man shadowing him. The feeling came to him all of a sudden, creeping into his mind with a cold sickening certainty. Before he saw the man, he knew that those strange mocking, sardonic and knowing eyes were shooting their gaze right through him to twist around and claw at his soul. He fought to stay standing, to prevent his suddenly weak legs from buckling beneath him and crashing him to the ground as the fear sapped him of strength. From the way the man grinned, it was clear that he knew the struggle that was taking place in Callum's mind.

Even though he managed to stay upright, the man's uneven grin, revealing that hideous set of cracked and browning teeth that looked inhumanly sharp for all that they were damaged

by neglect. He thought that, upon seeing the old man again, that sensation of ancient horror tainted by the power of the outer dimensions would diminish, that he would come to see that this was nothing more than a homeless old man made mad by life on the streets and substance abuse, but seeing him so close galvanised the first horrendous impressions, while adding further details to this man.

Before, through the effects of distance, he was spared some gruesome factors in the old man's physiology that were plain now, though he prayed that what he was seeing was some form of hallucination, even as he understood on an animal level that what he was seeing was maddening reality. The man's hunched form was wrong. The long coat he wore concealed the twisted body beneath enough for the casual observer who wants nothing to do with the unwashed vagrant, but to those who made a closer and more involved inspection would find that certain anomalies were apparent and couldn't be masked by the stained material of the coat.

Underneath the neglected coat things moved. Things that undulated and twitched in places where, on a normal person, there was nothing that could move in such ways. In the hollow of the man's ribs, beneath his armpit, something moved and hit the inside of the coat with a dim but audible thump. The front of the jacket, too,

fluttered as though manipulated from within by some kind of appendage that had no right to be so low on the body of any human.

Callum took this all in with a fascinated horror that verged on the hypnotic. The spell was broken when the old man took a single, shambling step towards him. Callum tensed in response. The old man's smile widened and a thick thread of drool oozed onto the lapel of the embattled coat. His malicious gaze glinted with a further spark of hideous knowledge.

With faltering, palsied muscles, Callum took a step back, an action that amused the old man even more.

The old man reached out, revealing a filthy hand gnarled by warts and fingers ending in split nails under which was caked a layer of unspeakable black dirt. For the first time Callum could smell the old man. The stench was unpleasant, but not for the thick cloying stink of bitter human perspiration. This smell was far worse, yet Callum was unable to place it, it was sickly sweet with a hint of mouldering age and, underlying it all, was an inhuman odour that the ancient, terrified reptilian part of Callum's brain recognised and wanted never to detect again.

"Come to Father Polzic, Callum," the old man said.

There was no way of telling what he found most appalling, most frightening: the insidious

voice, wet and gurgling from incalculable age; the suddenness of the statement; or the fact that the old man knew his name. There was no time or reason to analyse it, and he whirled around and hurried away from the cackling old fiend.

He was home, gasping for breath, even though he had done nothing more than a brisk walk from the point where he met the old man. The acceleration of his body's working was due to the effects of fear and the tumult that churned in his mind.

The incident was so queer, yet so short lived, that it could have been taken from a dream, and he wanted to believe that it was nothing more than a fantasy induced by stress and the strange frame of mind he had been incubating for the past few days. He could no more believe that than he could believe that the rain could fall back into the clouds, or that a huge eye glared down at the world from those same clouds. There was the unimpeachable mark of the real in his encounter with the strange old tramp who called himself 'Father Polzic', even if his anatomy held suggestions of dreams. The old man was real, his sickening odour and disgusting presence were arguments too strong for denial of his existence.

Before he had clearly thought about it, he was back on the computer, typing in the name 'Father Polzic' into the search engine he had found before. To his fascinated dismay, the

name seemed to carry some meaning to other people too. All at once he was looking at obscure websites, obscurer even than those that he had perused the day before.

On these sometimes scholarly, sometimes barely coherent sites, there were hints of connections with this old man and terrible gods, and that he appeared to those sensitive to the influence of these beings. The names of some of these creatures he recognised, to be joined by others. Hastur, a being of incredible potency and hideous appearance whose power extended to the inevitable force of entropy by means that are unknown, yet he was trapped in a lake on a distant planet, was one such figure. Then there was vampiric, elephantine Chaugnar Faugn, and Cthulhu who sleeps beneath the waves somewhere in the middle of the pacific, and the burrower Shudde M'ell, and Y'golonac the searcher of evil. There were many more and worse creatures described in the often wild text of these web sites, but he was becoming more curious about the message boards connected with them.

Upon entering these he found a further world of madness, people unsuppressed by the needs of polite and sane culture to hide their crazed imaginings and theories. On these message boards were discussions that ranged from the arguments of the existence of these beings and their servitors, to the ways in which certain

entities and forces were summoned to this plane of existence. The discussions became grotesque, unpalatable and difficult to follow. When these debased exchanges became too much for him he would go to another message board.

He hopped from one forum to another, finding the nature of each to be more baroque and enigmatic than the last. A certain type of discussion thread began to infuse these message boards, gaining greater space and pushing out what might be termed the normal threads. These were discussions that were not discussions, and they had postings that were blank or filled with random symbols that he could find no way to duplicate. As these bizarre threads proliferated and became the majority on some of the message boards, Callum's unease grew. It seemed that there were activities on here that were alien even to him. And he felt that he had experienced many things relating to the vagaries of the internet.

His discomfiture increased when, on several of the more obscure message boards dominated by these unreadable threads, his computer screen was filled by an alarming number of curious pop-ups. These were the way in which some companies advertised themselves, whether reputable or not, and they were nothing more than a nuisance to be dealt with by protective software. These pop-ups were

anything but advertising and circumvented what he thought to be the most reliable software available to combat them. These contained more of those curious symbols, along with lines of various languages, including English. They were garbled, for the most part, as if their authors had no concept of the language they used.

The activity on the message boards on which this material was in the majority increased in tandem with the incidences of the pop-ups. What had started as vague unease was beginning to bloom into outright fear. He could take no more when one pop-up, developing coherence seemed to scream at him, '*You are not wanted HEEEEERRRE!*' through the garble of alien and unfamiliar letters. He retreated from the message boards, feeling shaken and wanting only to get away from references to these weird gods and their minions.

Somehow, he found it impossible to pull himself away from finding out more about this lore that both sickened and fascinated him. It came as quite a shock to him to realise that the whole day was past and it was late on in the evening. He kept on digging.

On through the night he read. Stopping to place a heavy wardrobe over the door to the room when the feeling of being watched became oppressive and overwhelming. The

feeling nonetheless grew stronger, in keeping with the amount of knowledge he gained.

After much perseverance, on the dawn of the new day, he found more references to Father Polzic, or 'The Old Man of Four'. There were some rough illustrations of this man that had frightening resonance for Callum. It was even more stunning when it was claimed that this old man had been seen in the streets of Cairo, Moscow, Sao Paolo, Shanghai, Cape Town, Dacca and Canberra, all in the space of the last five hundred years. The feeling of cosmic dread that Callum had felt often in the past few days was reaching a fever pitch. This man was known on all continents and was at least *five hundred years old*. It was some kind of hoax.

He saw that there was no hoax involved when he read that the old man had been seen on Antarctica, disappearing into a whiteout, by the sole survivor of a recent science expedition. The rest had been killed when the boat taking them back home sank off the coast of the South Orkneys. The fear of the familiarity of this information was almost enough to reduce Callum to jibbering.

He was sweating and resorting to relieving himself in the bucket in his room when the telephone rang. There was a temptation to answer it, but he resisted, it could be the old man again. After all, was it not possible that if he knew his name, all of Callum's other details

would be known to him, including his phone number? He cowered in front of the computer, staring at the glowing screen.

The telephone rang a number of times in the following hours, Callum managed to tune it out. He was even coming to terms with the growling of his neglected stomach, as the need for food became a greater necessity. He filled his mind with more strange and bizarre knowledge, finding the fanatical message boards and participating in and starting his own discussions. He needed to know things, important things. He had so little time.

Another day passed with an excursion out of his room, while ignoring an increased number of phone calls. The feeling of being watched was crushing, but he fought through the fear and collected some food, bottles of water, and a roll of insulating tape. The stench on the room was tremendous as the bucket overflowed with his waste. Even that was of minor concern to him now.

The old man and Nyarlathotep consumed all of his waking hours. The people on the message boards were beginning to shun him now, as his questions became more frantic and his ravings intense. His time was so short, and there was nothing that he could do.

He heard Catherine at the front door. She wanted to speak to him. He ignored her. It could be Father Polzic, whose ways were that

of Nyarlathotep and he was a creator of lies and madness. The voice that sounded like Catherine's could have been crying when it finally gave up. He had no pity.

The feeling of being watched was all consuming now. Even with the door to his room barricaded and the window blocked by insulating tape, he felt that something was watching him. There was nothing in the room that could be used as a watching device, as he had smashed the web camera days ago.

Breathing in frantic panic hyperventilation, he glanced about the darkened, fly-occupied room. There were no cracks in the walls or around the door. His wide, glistening eyes fell on the glowing monitor before him.

It was an electronic device attached to a vast network. With the strange forces and resources available to him, could Nyarlathotep not be able to convert this device from a device that was looked at by the world to one that looked *at* the world?

With a howl of exertion and terror, he had raised the monitor over his head. Cables were torn from their places and the PC made a distressing sound at its mistreatment. He dropped the darkened, sparking monitor onto the floor, where the screen smashed and its bulk toppled over the bucket, spilling liquid filth all over the floor.

It was no longer safe here. Had it ever been safe here, despite his precautions? He threw the heavy wardrobe away from the door and tore away the insulating tape from the edges of the door. His feeling of exposure was crippling when he rushed out into the darkened living room of his flat. So many ways he could be seen.

There was a strange, strangled whining sound filling the room. It took him a moment to realise the sound was his own vocalisation of his dizzying terror. He had to get out of the flat, at least then he would have a chance to see and escape the torture of his watcher.

Half dressed – smelling of faeces, stale body odour and urine – he burst out into the night. The street seemed unfamiliar to him in the inadequate orange glow of the streetlights. His feet were cut by loose stones, but the numbing chill of the damp pavement and the overdose of adrenaline served to inure him to the pain as he began to run in a random direction. He gabbered incoherently to the night. He startled the homeless who tried to sleep. They ran from him as he lumbered along. He jumped away from shadows and reflections in his fear-crazed state.

He collapsed not long after, at the feet of Father Polzic. Somehow he knew he would be waiting for him. Father Polzic was a bearer of great knowledge.

The old man's inhuman eyes glinted through the gloom and, as Callum watched in disbelief, the coat opened to reveal that Father Polzic had more than one pair. A number of voices cackled too. Each voice was Father Polzic's. Callum screamed once and briefly as several sets of jagged claws ripped through his skin and bore him away by rarely travelled means to a court that was both close and infinitely far away, where wild gods danced.

Electronic Purgatory

12th September 20--

Mood: Curious

I've hit another impasse. I've been blogging for the better part of two years now, and I think I'm all talked out.

Haven't had a major spat with my girlfriend for ages. No major financial worries to speak of. My personal life seems to be in order, as much as these things ever are.

Everything I've wanted to speak about politically I've said on a number of occasions and I can't be bothered repeating them now.

Unless something miraculous happens in the next week, I'll be wrapping up the blog and, gasp, doing things in real life. I prayed it would never come to this.

15th September 20--

Mood: Excited

Spent the last couple of days on search engines and emailing friends. Something strange came to my attention.

It's seems to be a bit of an urban myth, but a recent one and something that made it into the news, albeit for a short while. What makes it even better is it's kind of on my doorstep.

The story concerns some guy from Glasgow, seems he was this average kind of Joe, worked in a shop, had a girlfriend, went out at the weekends and didn't do anything out of the ordinary.

If anyone recalls there was some weird weather in the city a while back, torrential rain. It seems that this storm tipped this guy over the edge. Attacked a customer in the shop he worked at. He lost his job and became obsessed with the internet.

He wasn't looking at porn like any other, normal, guy. He was frequenting some weird shit, I've been told, and he started to go really mad. Then he disappeared, left his computer destroyed and a room full of his own shit and piss.

I want to know what kind of stuff this guy was checking up. None of the things I've read can tell me and neither can any of my friends.

So, anyone out there, give me some clues.

16th September 20--

Mood: Frustrated

Come on. Not one person on my readers list can tell me what this guy was looking at? Have you all decided to go quiet or have you all lost your internet connections at the same time?

I haven't had any comments or emails since yesterday.

Speak to me.

17th September 20--

Mood: Happy.

Well, I'm glad some of you took the hint. I got a couple of comments with some ideas about what this guy would have been looking at. I've checked them and there isn't much there. A few pictures of weird stuff, maybe a list of books that look like they should be links, but aren't.

But thanks anyway. Keep it coming.

Heading off with the girl for a couple of days.

23rd September 20--

Mood: Surprised

Had a great week with the girl, thanks for asking.

I came back yesterday and I was knackered.

I had a look through my emails and I had this really strange one from someone with a name like iaiaftagn or something. Very weird.

As weird as this person's email address was, what they had to tell me was quite interesting, even if it did sound madder than a bag of talking carrots.

He said that he had read some of this guy, Callum Dewar's, posts on a few out of the way and out there forums. He sent me some links to them.

The links did come with an odd warning, "Do not enter these places lightly, most places in this man-made thing we call the internet separate us from the reality of other people. We speak to those who might well be figments of imagination for all that we are aware. There is a buffer that stops us thinking that what we are doing is entirely real. In these places I have guided you to, there are no such buffers or protections. Your life is in mortal peril in these places even as you type. I have done my part in showing you some of them and issuing this caution. Good luck."

Freaky and a little paranoid, but a helpful guy.

I'll start taking a look at these links tomorrow. I've got a couple of things to do today that will keep me away from the internet.

I'll tell you how I get on in a couple of days time.

25th September 20--

Mood: Weird

That was a strange lot of reading, but it was compelling. There are some wacky people out there. I wasn't sure whether to laugh or be really disturbed by what I was reading. There was a lot of ranting and a lot stuff being said that went over my head.

In the ranting camp was our Mister Dewar, although he did start out quiet, almost hesitant. After a short while on the first message board I went to, he was getting quite heated with some of the other members. Now, these people struck me as crazy, but compared to Callum they were considered and in touch with reality. Some of them were even offering him words of caution.

His were the scariest of the posts on these sites. I could tell I was watching someone buckle under some enormous mental pressure before disappearing to another, more extreme, message board.

I learned some new names today, gods if what the people on these sites are to be believed, names that I'm not sure I can spell properly let alone pronounce. They were Azzathoth, Cthulhu, Nyarlathotep, Shub-Niggurath and Father Polzic.

Some of the stories that are associated with this stuff are crazy and I won't bother going into them here. I'll set up a few links to let you read them on your own.

I took a quick look at what I assume are even more extreme message boards about this kind of stuff and my head started to hurt. Even among this level of crazy, though, Callum stood out as being different.

I'm going to lie down.

28th September 20--

Mood: Excited

Still looking through more of these things whenever I get the chance. It's amazing stuff.

5th October 20--

Mood: Angry

What a fucking bitch! One minute everything's fine and the next she's not happy. Now she's gone to stay with her friend. That's fine, she'll

come back when she realises what an idiot she's being.

It's not like I've spent every hour of the two weeks reading through these insane message boards. I've not neglected her. She seems to think otherwise though, only last night I took her out to a new restaurant. We had a nice night, I thought, and I wasn't anywhere near the internet all day.

Then I'm on for a couple of hours today, looking at the weirdest stuff yet and she goes off on one at me. I mean really going off, screaming, shouting, throwing stuff, the whole nine yards.

I was shocked. I was tempted to start screaming back at her, but I let her go, sounding like a lunatic as she was. She was still shouting and screaming as she walked out the door and down the street to her friend.

I've went back to looking at these message boards. I need to calm down some way.

7th October 20--

Mood: Gloomy

I still haven't heard anything from her. She must have been more pissed off at me than I thought.

Reading these message boards isn't helping my mood any. They are getting tougher to

wade through. What is it about the more insane people get, the more they have to talk about it and repeat it?

There are pages of rants on here that constitute single posts, and then the replies are even longer. I can't stop reading though, it's wild.

Callum's still excelling himself with the barmy.

8th October 20--

Mood: Excited

I think I may have made a break through in this whole thing. On one of the newer sites that I linked to from the other ones I found a few threads that were empty.

I say empty, I mean there were pages and pages of separate posts, but they were blank. The threads didn't have titles either which was strange in itself, given the verbose and attention-seeking nature of the rest of them. Each post on these threads was by a different poster and, again, the names, locations, avatars and even join dates were blank.

The join dates being blank was most disturbing. The only way I could differentiate the posters was the post counts – all in the thousands and all different.

It was creepy to see pages and pages of these posts with nothing in them, no content and no hint of communication. I'm sure there was communication though; it's a gut feeling that leaves me cold and afraid.

I found one of these threads and at last I see some human communication. It's from Callum, thinking and writing the same thing I was thinking.

He made a couple of attempts to communicate and the later ones have panic in them. He's a defiant guy though, I'll give him that.

He makes it clear he's going to try to dig further.

So am I.

11th October 20--

Mood: Tired

I just looked at the dates of all of Callum's activity I've been able to find so far. It all took place in less than three days. I've slogged through for weeks and it's killing me.

Any evidence that was missing from the case stating that Callum Dewar was nuts is now in place. If you went through this stuff at the pace he did, even if you were sane at the beginning, you would be a fruit-loop by the end.



I've been delving further, following him through these message boards that he got through so damned fast. I'm seeing a pattern of these blank threads becoming more prevalent as I go, and it's getting eerier, with less people ranting.

I'm starting to miss the barely coherent discussions and arguments.

It's been quiet in my house too. She's still staying with her friend, we talked on the phone last night and she started crying when I answered her question about whether I was still going through those message boards. I wasn't going to lie to her, I love her too much, but I don't understand why this is upsetting her so much.

I have to carry on.

12th October 20--

Mood: -

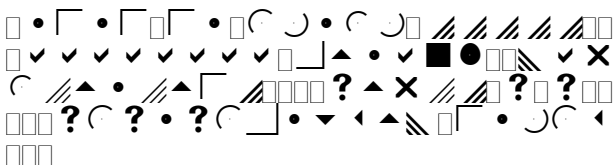


13th October 20--

Mood: Confused

What the hell is it with those lines of symbols? They weren't there when I was typing the post up and now I can't get rid of them. I'll have to contact the webmaster and see if he can shed some light on it.

I know the font. I just can't change it to a readable one.



Anyway, I'm going further through the links, following Callum through a series of ever more strange and barren message boards.

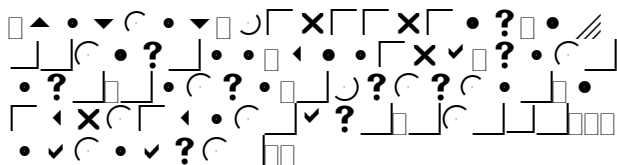
The pop-ups are getting more frequent too. Most of those are blank as well.



15th October 20--

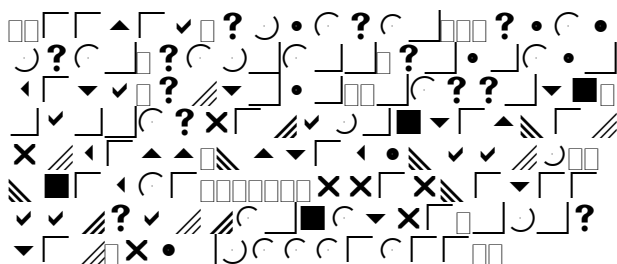
Mood: Scared

More lines of gibberish that I can't erase and can't translate. The webmaster's clueless too.



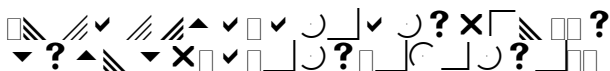
Something weird happened to me yesterday while I was looking at the message boards that Callum had been going on.

Those pop-ups were going insane and the pop-up blocker couldn't stop any of them. I was closing five or six of them every couple of minutes. Some of them had stuff written in them now, and it was in the same font as the stuff that's been appearing on this blog. Big bold stuff. Some of those pop-up windows took up the whole screen.



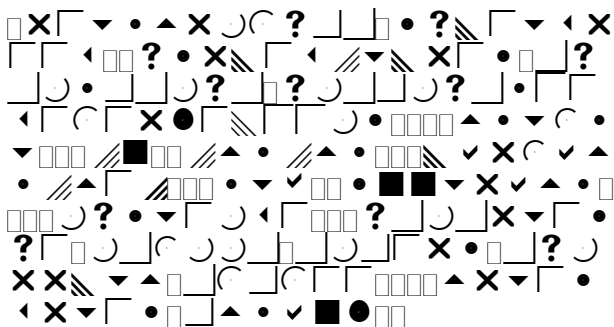
They got really frantic at one point and at the same time my phone rang. I picked it up, not thinking anything of it. There was no voice from the receiver, just this weird faint hissing and roaring. I'm sure I could hear someone screaming too.

When I looked back at the screen, the pop-ups had died off quite a bit. There had to be a connection, so I checked to see where the phone call had come from. No number. Not just a withheld number, it was as if no one had phoned me at all.



The girl phoned me again. I jumped. I was so glad just to hear her.

Mood: -



Mood: Scared

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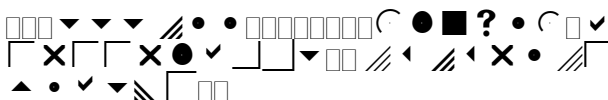
More weird shit yesterday. This time while I was at work. I was doing my usual thing, just working away. I've been getting a little sick of the internet and I've been talking to the girl more again.

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Anyway, I was in work, when those pop-ups appeared on my screen. I haven't been on those fucking message boards for a couple of days, but up pops all this shit. At the same time every phone in the building starts ringing.

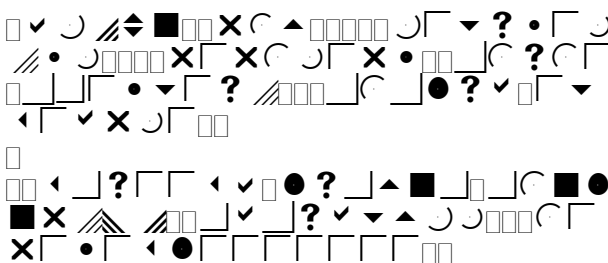
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I didn't want to, but I felt I had to, answer my own phone. There it was that roaring, hissing sound, much louder than before. There was a definite screaming, though there was no way it could be human. There was this weird clicking too. It was horrible and it was threatening.

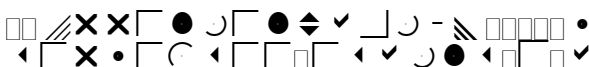


I don't feel safe at home anymore. I've moved my PC out of my bedroom now, I'm afraid something will come out while I'm asleep.

Mood: Crazy



I heard the PC working while I was trying to sleep last night. It was making noises that it shouldn't be. Even when I pulled the plug on it, it kept on making those weird noises.

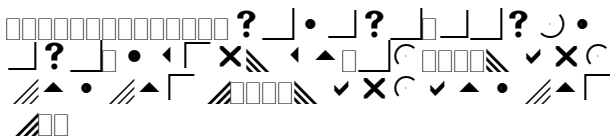


A 10x10 grid of 100 abstract symbols. The symbols are a mix of geometric shapes (squares, circles, lines, triangles), punctuation marks (question marks, exclamation marks, commas, hyphens), and other characters (asterisks, crosses, hash marks). The symbols are arranged in a seemingly random pattern across the grid.

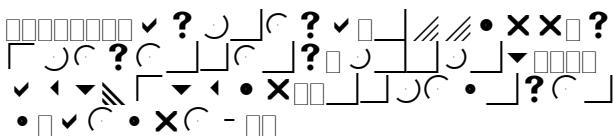
19th October 20--

A complex grid of symbols arranged in four rows. The symbols include various geometric shapes like squares, circles, triangles, and crosses, as well as question marks and diagonal lines. Some symbols are grouped together or repeated.

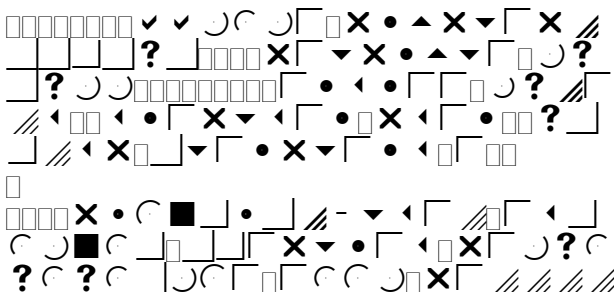
Couldn't organise getting out of here fast enough with work and her friend not having the room just now. Tomorrow, she said.

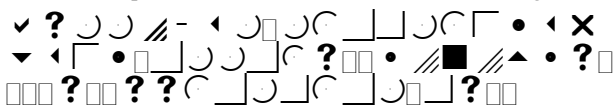


Last night was a nightmare. I couldn't sleep. I could still hear the PC working even though I'd disconnected it.

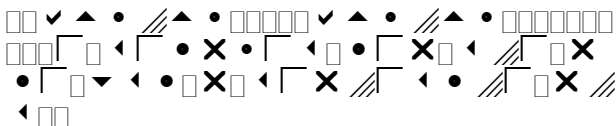


I went to the toilet and I saw something in the hallway. It was no more than a shadow, but I got the impression of alien and with more eyes and legs than should be natural. I know it saw me.



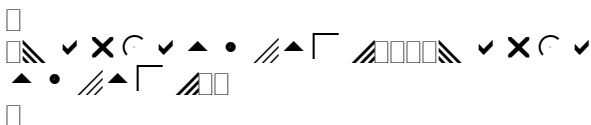
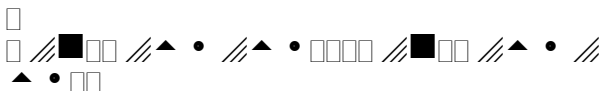
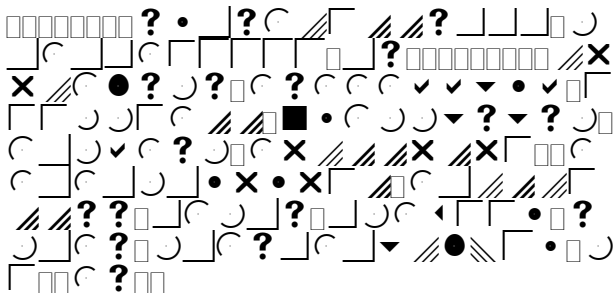


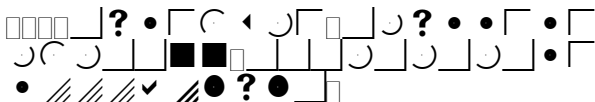
I don't even know why I'm adding to this blog anymore. I don't even want to think about those freaky message boards Callum went on.



20th October 20--

Mood: Scared

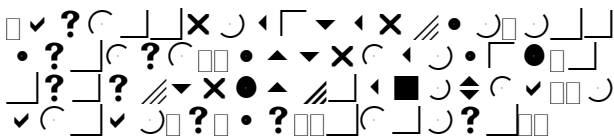




Fuck! There's things moving! In the house.
All the time. I can't get out! I'm trapped.

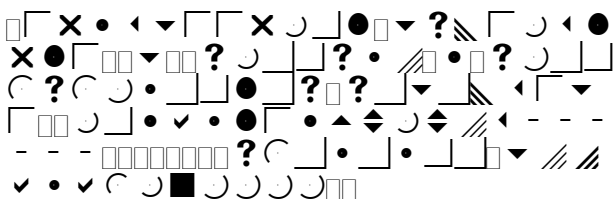
All I can hear is that roaring and clicking and screaming. Those things are in the house all the time, not just at night. They're just waiting to come for me.

I'm so



21st October 20--

Mood: -



NOTE FROM THE WEBMASTER: I've been asked to take this blog down by this man's family. They have my condolences.

Observer. A Fragment

It sickened me from the moment that I first saw it.

I'd been watching it for over three hours. It scuttled across the bottom of the glass tank sometimes hitting the side where it would attempt to gain purchase and climb; it would fail in each attempt.

I had no trouble with its alienness. That was why I had wanted to observe it. It was the major source of its curiosity value and why I still watched it.

The thing was no larger than my thumbnail, and I'm still hazy on how they managed to capture such a tiny, fast-moving and obviously intelligent creature in the first place.

Even through my own curiosity, I'm wondering *why*.

There's nothing on earth that I've ever seen that I could compare to this creature. It's minute size aside; it had nothing that could link it physiologically to any order of land animals. The closest I can describe it as is a tiny jellid sea urchin, but that doesn't cover the bizarre way in which it moved. Exact details of its form were hard to discern as it was a dark blue that verged on black.

None of these physical things alone would have accounted for my feelings of sickened antipathy towards the thing. I've seen things that look far worse that have been landed from the abyssal depths of the sea.

I told myself that it was the sounds that it made. For something so small it could make quite a din. The noises it made were incomprehensible to anyone who listened, but the consensus was that it was language. A sophisticated language at that.

I like to think that it was the constant stream of angry syllables that made me dislike the creature so, and found being in the same room as it so unsettling.

The truth is that was an excuse, there was something about its existence that I found I couldn't reconcile it with my own, rationalistic world-view. An opinion that itself lacked any rationality.

It was this lack of rationality that drove me to lift the lid of the tank, reach in, corner the beast

and crush it until the screaming stopped and it was nothing more than a smear of foul-smelling muck on the glass.

I regret nothing.

Reaching from the Dark

I used to come here a lot as a boy. The old factory building was in a better state of repair then, that rear wall had yet to crumble. The fence always seemed to have the hole in it though, as if the owners were inviting trespassers onto the land.

Even as a kid I thought it was funny that the grounds around the factory were so clean. The concrete paving was, for the most part, unbroken. A few had been smashed by vandals. No weeds grew up in between the cracks in the paving.

Nothing seemed to have set up home in the factory either, such a big place should have been a haven for rats or mice. There was nothing; no evidence of rodents anywhere to be seen. Nothing was nibbled and there were no

droppings. Even birds came nowhere near the building to roost.

I was curious about the place after being so long away from the town. There it was, the years had worn away some of it, but it was still as I remembered it from my childhood. I made certain that was close to the case by coming here late on in the day when the light was fading and the shadows inside the old building seemed to bleed out into the surrounding property.

I smiled at how, even as brash as me and my friends were then, we always expressed our unease while there. Being boys we were more afraid of looking cowardly in front of our friends and we always stayed for as long as the light held out.

There was still that uneasy feeling now. My car was a few yards behind me, yet I still almost believed that I would be walking back home with all my friends. Something that I found almost as exhilarating as being here.

I had invited my wife to come and join me in reliving this part of my childhood. She was less than enthusiastic about the suggestion. She would rather stay in my parent's warm house and watch something on television. It was a cold night, but not so cold as being out for an hour would be such a horrible ordeal.

"I can't understand what the fascination is with that awful old place, Christopher," my

mother said after my wife declined the offer to go.

"It's a little bit of my boyhood, mum. It was fun when I was a kid and I want to go out there and take a look around," I said. "It's not often I get to be an irresponsible kid again."

"Not many irresponsible kids go near there anymore since the accident."

"I thought that would have attracted even more. Nothing attracts kids more than a good grisly death scene."

"Maybe kids have changed a bit since you were a boy, Christopher. The kids now either spend time in the park or wandering the streets aimlessly or in front of their Play Boxes or Game thingies."

"I don't think kids will have changed that much."

"I wouldn't call it a death scene. That poor boy died a long time later."

"Okay, an accident scene."

"You just be careful up there, Christopher. I don't want an accident like that happening to you. And I don't want you to get mugged by any of these kids either."

"I suppose that's a way they've changed. Don't worry. I know how to take care of myself. I've managed this long."

My wife gave a bark of derisive laughter. I leaned over her and kissed her head.

"I love you too, dear," I said as I left.

As ever when the subject of the old factory was brought up, my father, such a verbose man under normal circumstances, became reticent. That was another thing that I remembered from my childhood that, while my mother was reluctant to talk about the place other than to give warnings about safety, my father would never utter a word about the place, ever. When he was addressed in reference to the place he would either pretend not to have heard, change the subject, or leave the room. It was a family curiosity that only my mother had no questions about.

I found out from an old family friend years before I left town that my father had worked in the factory prior to it closing down. It seemed that he had been made redundant from the plant after a number of practices and processes that took place in the factory were uncovered leading to the local authorities stepping in and closing the place. That was something that had never been discussed by either of my parents.

A short time after I moved away, the thought of the plant being closed in such hurried and dark circumstances was too much for me to resist and I did some research into what the factory had produced.

It took some months as the company that owned it had changed management several times in the intervening years and mergers, along with other company wings sinking into

the murky world of corporate politics without a trace, made tracking those elusive owners a task of huge proportions. At last I found the area manager for the company at the time. The man had quite a story to tell.

Just like my mother this man was hard to engage on the subject and he dodged and stuttered some excuses. It made me all the more eager to find out what the man knew because it seemed, by the way the man tried to get away from the subject, that something interesting had taken place in the factory.

At last the man relinquished and told me that the main products of the factory were pharmaceuticals. However there was a research department that was kept under wraps from the regular customers, even the government were in the dark about the whole thing. There was a small number of staff in the factory who knew what was going on.

The most senior of these people were dead. They had died in the months after the factory was closed down, either in accidents or they had taken their own lives. The less senior staff involved in the whole affair disappeared, it seemed that whatever had taken place in the factory required that they be protected.

He did tell me that the plant manager had brought in a consultant some time before the factory was closed. An old man called Polzic, that the man thought looked like a tramp, yet

the plant manager insisted was an integral part of this new and secretive research. The man said that Polzic disturbed him in an indefinable way. He knew nothing of what became of this man Polzic and I could find nothing about him. All I found were some strange folk stories involving a character of that name.

The man could give no more information on the whole thing. He was certain that what was going on was illegal in the extreme, but anything more than that he had no idea. Or so he claimed and I saw no reason for trying to get anything more from him.

So here I was, and as well as that sense of dread and the nostalgia, I felt excited by the possibility of discovering something about this place that had prompted the local authorities to rush in, close the place down and block off the windows and doors with boards.

For a moment I wondered if there was some toxic element in the air that might give me cancer or cause me to grow an extra leg. I decided it was a stupid thought. I switched on the torch I had taken with me and approached the hole in the wall.

It was obvious, once I got within ten feet of the wall, that this crumbling wasn't the result of weather. This was a deliberate act of someone smashing their way in with some heavy equipment. The rest of the wall was fine.

From in the distance behind me I heard a huge flock of jackdaws begin to croak. I spun around in time to see the mass of flapping black shapes take to the air from the shelter of the trees. The gigantic flock receded from me as though they were making for the pink clouds close to the horizon.

I laughed at how easy I was to make jump.

I played the pool of light around the hole in the wall. The hole was man-sized, so whoever had decided to break in had a lot of time to smash through. I was unsurprised by that, given how isolated the building was. I was more surprised that anyone would put in the effort to get in at all.

The torch light caught a curious piece of graffiti at one side of the opening. It was like an irregular pentacle with what looked like a simplistic flaming eye, or something like it, in the middle. I stared at the small drawing. I was disquieted by it. At the same time I was glad that it was there.

I threw off the weird feeling, putting it down to the lateness of the hour and the strangeness of the story surrounding the factory's closure, and I stepped into the old place.

Damp and mustiness were the first things that I felt in the air. The air was dusty and motes spun and danced in the torch beam. With no vermin taking up residence the only smells in

the place were of dank age and old chemicals. I coughed as dust caught in my throat.

Little had been moved since the place was closed forty years ago. I had underestimated how desperate the authorities were to have this place shut down had been. Tools had been laid down and were now buried under drifts of dust. White lab coats were still hung as they had been; only now they were more of a sickly yellow colour.

On the floor, obvious through the thick layer of dust, were three sets of foot prints. Dust had settled into them too, but the thinner layer was easy to spot. Whoever had broken in had done so some years ago and no one else had been back.

It must have happened after the boy had fallen from the roof of the building. That had been a major local tragedy at the time. The boy had been healthy and happy, then he and his friends had come out here, just as I had done as a boy, to play. They had been gone long after sunset and some of the parents got worried.

They were right to be concerned, as the boy had decided to climb onto the roof by using the drainage pipes. The pipes held and he had run along the roof thirty feet above the ground. He was so elated by his triumph over the piping that he became too confident. He fell.

The fall wasn't fatal, although given the level of his injuries, I'm sure the boy wished it had

been. What the doctor's discovered was what ended the boy's life. He had a tumour and rumour was that the doctors had encountered nothing like it. Specialists were brought in to treat the boy, but it was too late; the virulence of the tumour was such that he was dead within two weeks of the accident.

Of course, the boy's parents were devastated and the town was stunned. Some people even speculated that the chemicals used on the premises years before were carcinogenic and still a hazard. The local authorities put up more boarding and posted warnings.

It was obvious that some people had ignored these warnings. I was one of them. Something about the chemicals in the building leaking out and causing anyone close by to develop cancer sounded wrong to me. Neither me nor my friends had ever developed cancer and I'm sure the cancer rates among the generations before and after us were no more than average.

These three trespassers felt the same way, I saw. I took that to be a good sign and delved deeper into the old factory. My only concession was to tie a handkerchief around my mouth and nose to stop me sneezing and coughing. I wished I could do something about the dust getting into my eyes. I decided to live with a little blurry vision.

The trespassers were on something of a destructive rampage, as the first door I came to

had been smashed off its hinges. Whatever they wanted in here, they had decided to get to it without consideration to property damage.

Next to this doorway, again, I saw that symbol. I was beginning to understand why I found it so disturbing. I tried to identify what it had been drawn with. It looked like no kind of paint I had ever seen and it wasn't ink. The strange blue-green colour picked up the light and seemed to glow. I studied this one even less than the one on the wall outside.

I carried on through the gloomy interior of the place, seeing more evidence that it had been abandoned in the middle of a working day. It was an eerie feeling.

The only things that were company to me were my thoughts and my muffled breathing. The cushioning effect of the thick layer of dust deadened any sound that my footsteps would make. It was unnerving.

I passed the manager's offices. They were locked, but I shone the light inside. There was an old typewriter sitting on a desk on the outer office with a couple of sheets of paper stuck in it. It was an unfinished letter. Next to the typewriter was a cup half full with long-cold tea.

I walked on. The creepiness of the place was starting to get to me. I was beginning to hear things. Some, I was sure, were behind me.

Most of the sounds were coming from up ahead.

Pressing on, I wasn't sure what I was doing anymore. I had nothing to prove to anyone. There was more than simple curiosity now, too.

Another door, smashed open, was caught in the torch beam. Another one of those symbols. I was getting sick of seeing them already.

This door opened onto a set of stairs leading down. Since I was on the ground floor, the only place these stairs could lead was into the basement. I shone the beam down the stairs to check if the stairs were safe and I cried out in fright.

The light showed me a skull half way down the flight of stairs. The beam reached no further than that.

Still gripped by this mad curiosity, I crept down the stairs and crouched over the skull. There were gouges around the eye sockets and the along the crown. I was tempted to touch it to see if it was real, and discovered that was beyond my level of bravery.

I realised that the musty smell was replaced by something else down here. Something so strong and acrid that it made its way through the handkerchief I wore over my face.

At the bottom of the stairs were more bones. Enough, I saw, to make up three men. There were tatters of old clothes strewn along the

floor too. A floor, I realised, that was clean of any dust.

I heard something moving in the darkness of the basement, a wet sound. I was no longer the only one breathing down here. I whipped the light of the torch around, trying to catch a glimpse of whatever was making the sounds.

The light showed strange equipment. Some of it was standard scientific equipment. There were items, though, that looked exotic and weird in an unpleasant way. These items were almost organic-looking even though they were made from some kind of metal.

Then I saw things that were undeniably organic. Slabs of flesh in large jars, discoloured as though they had been dead for months, but, and I'm sure this was no trick of the light, they throbbed and twitched as if they were alive.

That movement again. It was closer now. I could hear the scraping of claws as well as the breath filling ragged lungs.

I was backing towards the stairs when my torch beam hit something large and glistening moving behind one of the work benches. I got nothing more than an impression of a ridged back, green and black skin, uneven tufts of skin and an ugly hand, longer and thicker than any human hand, ending with brutally serrated claws.

I turned and ran. I didn't even care that whatever the thing was had been right behind me, I just wanted to get away. I followed my fresh footprints through the abandoned factory and burst out into the fresh air. The sun had set in the time I had spent inside the building.

I fell onto the concrete paving and the torch rolled away from me. The beam caught someone standing a few feet away from me.

My scream was loud and high-pitched.

"It's okay, son. You're safe now," my father said. He came over and helped me to my feet.

"D-dad?" I said.

"I told those boys not to go down there. That thing's not for killing. They thought they understood it with their chanting and their symbols and their books. I told them it would take more than that to deal with that thing.

"Old Polzic's instructions were followed precisely. Even the police realised that all they could do was lock it up.

"One day the elder signs will fade and it's going to get out. Then Nyarlathotep's work will be completed. There'll be nowhere for any of us to hide."

I stared at my father in horror as he led me back to my car. He looked at me.

"Yes, you'll be fine to drive. I'll get you back at the house. I hope you've learned a lesson here, son," he said and went back to his own car.

I climbed behind the wheel of my car and stared at the rear lights of my father's car disappearing around a corner. The darkness was too much for me, I switched the engine on. The lights dismissed the darkness outside, but they did nothing to dismiss the image of the thing that had reached for me from the dark.

Christine's World

Wood

Car alarms still screamed. It had been an hour since the echoes of the initial blast had died away. The smell lingered though.

What remained of the tree was a jagged stump that seemed to be made up of a bundle of toothpicks jammed into the soil of the ornamental garden.

Wood was everywhere, from fragments the size of matches to spear-sized (and shaped) chunks. Some pieces had become lodged in brickwork and cars.

Most people were uninterested in the debris of the tree. The carnage was what stunned everyone. Ten people were dead. Twenty-seven were injured. There was blood everywhere.

The bodies were long gone.

Because she had been out shopping, Christine Riordan was the first police officer on the scene. The cuts, slashes, severed limbs and ruined faces were not the things that held her attention, even as she gave first aid to those that she could. It was the wood that held her.

She was still staring at the remains of the tree. She had never heard a sound like that in her life. Every part of the tree must have blasted apart, as she could recognise nothing that even resembled an intact twig.

“This is quite a mess, isn’t it?” Doctor Jerrod said. The cigarette hanging from his mouth bobbed as he spoke.

“Yeah. Any idea what could have caused it?” Christine said.

“Me? No. The bomb boys want to take a look at it. Nothing to do with you, was it?”

She looked at him. He was grinning and causing the lit cigarette to waver hazardously close to the tip of his nose.

“You’re such a teenager, Rich,” she said.

“Sorry. You have that affect on me,” he said, managing to inject no contrition in his voice at all.

“What a mess. When are bomb disposal supposed to be here?”

“Within the hour. Seems pointless.”

“That’s because it *is* pointless. The tree blew up.”

“Some people like to find out why things happen.”

“You just said it’s pointless.”

“To us, yes. To someone who’s into explosives, though it could be the biggest excitement in years.”

“Fair point. Although I’ve never heard of an explosives geek before.”

“It’s a funny old world.”

Christine went back to staring at the stump. Jerrod hovered behind her.

“What?” she said.

“You’ve got that Miss Marple expression again.”

“I just want to keep an eye on this and see how it goes.”

“What’s to know? It’s a freak occurrence.”

“I’m curious.”

“Yes, you are.”

She looked down at her bloodstained clothes. Dealing with the severe lacerations of panicking people had left her blouse covered in smeared handprints.

“I have to go home and get cleaned up,” she said and left Jerrod.

* * *

It was some weeks later that she started to collate some of the facts. They were startling.

The tree was so ordinary it made her head hurt. It had been planted thirty years ago as part of the town's regeneration at the time. There were no foreign objects in it, no metal, no explosives – much to bomb disposal's annoyance.

A quick look at the weather and atmospheric conditions showed nothing out of the ordinary.

"Are you still looking over that stuff?" Jeff, her husband, said.

"Well, yes," she said and shook the papers in his direction.

"You're not going to find anything, you know."

"Probably not, but something tells me that I might."

"Your famous 'something'."

"It's never steered me wrong before."

"What is it, women's intuition?"

"Could be."

"How many times have you looked over all of this stuff?"

"This is new stuff. This is the people who died."

"That's just morbid."

"It is a bit depressing. These people are just gone."

"That's what dead usually means."

"Sarcy. There's something here, though."

Jeff frowned and went to sit next to her on the sofa. As much as he made a show of being

dismissive or uninterested in her investigations, she knew that he paid close attention and was quite proud of her. Something he was giving away now.

“What is it?” he said.

“Look, here. Date of birth.”

“Twelfth of March seventy three.”

“Look at the rest.”

“Every year from nineteen seventy up to seventy-nine all with the same day of birth in each year.”

“I happen to know that none of the injured shared a birthday. Just those ten.”

“What do you suppose it means?”

Christine looked at the sheaf of papers in her hand. There was knowledge there. It was weighty knowledge and she knew if she dug long enough and hard enough she would find it.

She made a decision.

“I don’t know and I don’t want to find out,” she said.

With that, she scooped up the photocopies of reports and took them to her paper shredder. Within an hour all the evidence was gone.

Spores

The light came on in the basement. Even though Christine had been using a torch to navigate the house, the larger light still managed to dazzle her. She covered her eyes to allow them to adjust to the new flood of light.

She aimed the torch up at the man at the top of the stairs. She was aware of him only as a silhouette. She knew who he was, knew what he looked like.

He startled her. Rather ironic when she knew well enough that it was his home she was in.

“Who are you?” he said, his voice rough with anger.

“You shouldn’t leave your windows open when you’re out. Especially at this time of year,” she said.

Her eyes were adjusting now. The body language of the man was different to what it had been when she met him before. He was now puffed up on adrenaline and indignation. She could understand why.

He was made doubtful by her question.

“What do you mean?” he said.

“It’s just common sense. You left that upstairs window open and it wasn’t hard for me to climb in. Imagine what would have happened if I was someone who actually wanted to rob you. Or worse,” she said.

“It’s Yvonne’s fault, I told her to close that window before we left.”

“Why didn’t you do it?”

“I was in a hurry.”

“Not the best excuse. Your home security should be your top priority at all times.”

“Yeah,” he said and realised that she had been stalling. “How the hell did you get down here? The door was locked.”

“I’m a police officer. WPC Christine Riordan.”

She could see without the searing pain in her eyeballs now. The man was frowning. He was still angry, but now he was confused too.

“Is this something to do with what happened to Steve Purves and his family?” he said.

“Yes,” she said, there was no reason to lie. In fact the man deserved the truth.

He jumped to the wrong conclusion. She was prepared for it, although she was hoping that he would wait until she could explain why she was here.

“I remember you now. My wife and I have already given statements. We were out staying with my mother that night. Besides I had no reason to kill Steve, he was a nice guy,” he said, babbling.

“That’s not why I’m here,” she said with a sigh. “There’s no way you could have done it, we know that.”

“So why are you here?”

“A feeling. I saw something here and heard something that made me think that your basement is the key to this whole thing.”

Unsure, the man stared at her. He was thinking that she was out of her mind. Well, so did Jeff. *She* thought she was out of her mind. She was unsure of what she was expecting to find down here, and when she did she had no idea what she would do with what she learned.

“Ah!” she said.

The man jumped. He had every right to be still tense. She sympathised with him. Finding a strange woman rooting around your home late at night was bad enough. Discovering that she was one of the police who interviewed him and his wife would make anyone edgy.

She went to one of the shelves in the basement and picked up the log sitting there. A cluster of brown mushrooms sprouted from it.

“*Lentinula edodes*? Shiitake mushrooms?” she said.

“Yes, my wife bought the log for me a couple of months ago,” he said.

“Well that gives me something.”

“Why are you looking for the mushrooms?”

“I’m not looking for them. Not specifically. I’ll let you in on a secret if you promise not to tell anyone else. It would cost me my job.”

“I’ll keep it to myself.”

“There were mushroom spores found on all the bodies of the victims. As well as the kind of soil you get for plant pots.”

“Wouldn’t that be the kind of evidence that could convict me?”

“It would be if your alibi wasn’t true. I’ve told you already, you’re in no danger of being convicted of murder.”

“I’ve got two big plant pots with some flower seeds in them. I’m starting them off in here, before sticking them outside.”

He pointed to two big terracotta plant pots sitting in a corner of the basement in which little light was able to get.

She went over to them. Around the base of one of them was soil and a couple of seeds with tiny roots trailing from them. The surface of the soil was disturbed. She looked in the other

one and in that the soil was smooth and patted-down.

She shone the torch on the wall behind the plant pots. Leading from the disturbed one was a trail of soil, she used the beam to follow the trail of mashed dirt to the tiny window of the basement.

“What is that?” the man said as he went down to join her in the basement.

“I have no idea,” she said and looked at the plant pot again. “When was the last time you were down here?”

“Start of the month. Three weeks ago.”

As she shone the torch beam at the disturbed plant pot again, the surface shifted. It was a twitch of irritation from something that was buried in the soil. The thing that had displaced the seeds and had left a trail of soil on the walls and ceiling of the basement.

“Do you have anything that you can use as a weapon down here? Preferably something long,” she said as whatever was in the plant pot moved again.

“A broom. I have plenty of tools here too,” he said. He was nervous again, she knew how he felt.

“Bring the broom and a hammer.”

She listened as he rummaged for and retrieved the two items. He stood behind her. She could tell that he was peering at the circle of light cast by the torch.

“Is that a rat?” he said.

“No. Never heard of rats burrowing like this,” she said. “Give me the hammer. When I tell you to, ram the handle of the broom in there as hard as you can.”

She hefted the hammer and turned to look at the man. He looked terrified.

“Shaun? Shaun! What’s going on down there!”

They both jumped at Yvonne’s voice coming from the top of the stairs.

“Yvonne, you should stay up there. I think we have a rat down here,” Shaun said. “I’ll get rid of it.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Ready?” said Christine.

“No.”

“NOW!”

With a grunt Shaun did as he was instructed. The rounded end of the broom handle sank into the soil and stopped less than six inches from the surface.

Whatever it hit squealed.

The wooden handle started to buck. Shaun was having trouble controlling the creature. The plant pot was swaying. Soil was being thrown onto the floor.

“Shit!” said Shaun.

The plant pot toppled over and there was an explosion of soil and something scurried out at incredible speed. It whipped past Christine’s

leg before she could bring the hammer down. The thing managed to swipe her leg and open a painful gash. She hissed in pain.

The thing struck a wall.

Arms. That was her first impression. Lots of arms with too many joints that moved in too many directions. The next thing that struck her were the glistening blades that seemed to cover the twelve or fourteen arms. Its eyes were huge and the colour of bile.

“Use the brush end! Before it moves again!” she said. Wanting to break them both out of the paralysis that the thing’s appearance caused.

To his credit Shaun thrust the head of the broom at the creature and pinned it against the wall. It squealed again and began to use the blades on its arms to hack at the broom. The wooden implement would last no more than thirty seconds at this rate.

Christine lunged forward and brought the hammer down between the eyes of the creature. It stopped tearing at the wood for a second. It was going to start again. She hit it with the hammer a second time. One of the eyes popped.

She blugeoned the creature until the bladed arms twitched ineffectually. The black body fluids of the creature dripped off her arms and the broom was drenched in them.

“Have you ever seen anything like that before?” Shaun said when the shock had worn off.

“No,” she said once she got her breath back. “I think this is what killed the Purves family though. I think some people will be very interested in this.

She lifted the thing by one of the razored arms and grimaced.

“Could you get me a bag for this?” she said.

He brought her an old hessian sack that looked as if it had last been used some time in the forties. She dropped the dripping creature into the sack.

“Thanks for your help, Shaun,” she said.

“Er, no problem,” he said as she walked out of the basement.

Graveyard

“If I took you anywhere like this you’d bawl me out,” said Jeff Riordan.

“Sh! I told you, you didn’t need to come along,” said Christine.

“You said you were going to the cemetery and I thought you would like the company.”

“Thanks, honey. Now be quiet.”

They had already scaled the fence to get into the cemetery. Jeff had complained about almost being castrated by the spear tops. His idea of stealth differed from hers, it seemed.

Keeping to the path in between the graves, Christine alternated shining her torch on the gravestones and checking the list she was carrying. She was yet to find any of the names.

The first death had taken place two years before. The man was minding his own business as far as anyone could tell, and then he dropped dead in the middle of the street. He was in his mid-thirties and was healthy. He just died. There should have been nothing suspicious.

No one else saw anything suspicious about it, but Christine had paid attention to the death. When it was discovered it was a freak occurrence, her curiosity had increased. She thought about it a lot in the week after the death before realising there was nothing to look into.

It was the subsequent deaths that drew her interest further. There was no obvious connection between them. They were all of different ages, sexes and social backgrounds. It was only those six deaths that made her interested.

She checked up on each of the deceased and there was nothing unusual or untoward about any of them. For weeks she tried to work out what had made her so drawn to these deaths.

It hit her, as these things often do, in the middle of the night. They had all been buried. An unusual thing in itself, but they were all buried in the same cemetery. Rather coincidental, she thought. It was time to pay the place a visit.

She had gone there during the day. There seemed to be nothing outstanding about the place, it was a cemetery and no more. She

sensed there was something wrong though, something that would be stronger at night.

Here she and Jeff were on a cold winter's night, feeling as though there was ice forming on their extremities.

She was feeling frustrated and optimistic in equal measure.

Although 'optimistic' was an overstatement. She knew that she was on the right track to the root of this, but she could still be a long way from finding it.

She wanted to find one of the gravestones. In hindsight she should have found one in her previous visit and noted its location. Wandering through the cemetery at eleven o'clock at night trying to find one of six headstones in amongst hundreds was foolish.

She was going to find one of them. She could add stubbornness to her list of sins too.

"I need to pee," Jeff said.

Christine sighed and cast about with the torch. She settled the beam on a bush.

"There you go, an outside toilet," she said. "Be quick."

She ran the beam of the torch over the ground again. The loose stones of the path glistened as frost began to condense on them.

Jeff rustled out of the bushes puffing on his hands, "Do we need to stay here much longer? I almost peed an icicle."

"I hope not, but I'm going to find one of these," she said.

They walked on a bit further and Jeff was about to say something more when she spotted a name from her list.

"Gotcha!" She said.

"Now what?" Jeff said.

She hadn't thought of that. She folded the list and put it in her pocket. With the torch she examined the grave. Nothing unusual on the face of it, except...

"What the hell?" she said.

She took off one of her gloves and went to the square patch of grass beneath the gravestone. She hovered her hand a few inches above the grass.

The heat coming from the ground was fantastic, it would account for why the lack of frost on the grass.

"Is that steam?" Jeff said as he hunkered down next to her.

"Yeah. Something's heating up the ground here," she said.

She felt uneasy and exposed. She and Jeff *were* exposed here. She gave no thought to what they be exposed to.

"We have to get out of here!" She said and stood.

The torch died.

"Shit!" They both said in unison.

She had expected it. She denied that it would happen, but she knew that it would. As she knew that something would move in the sudden darkness.

Her eyes were still coming to terms with the dark. She could make out the shadows of the headstones and little else.

“Chris, what is that?” Jeff said, confirming that there was something looming up along the rows of headstones.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t want to find out, do you?”

Jeff shook his head. The large, dark thing flowed towards them. Eight pinpricks of red light were arranged in a circle on the leading edge of the thing. Eyes, as best as she could guess.

They backed away from the oncoming bulk. Without the benefit of the torch, running was a risky endeavour. She had no idea how fast the thing could move.

It got closer. She could smell something thick and pungent. Jeff gagged. They kept moving carefully back, it seemed that he held the same hope that she did, and that it would do nothing to them if they made no sudden movements.

They were ten feet away from the grave now. The thing was on top of the area of warm ground. It seemed to be sinking in.

Christine thought it was the right time to run and she pulled Jeff along with her. When they came close to the perimeter fence, the torch blinked back into life. There was no time to think about that as they struggled to get over without injuring themselves.

They had walked a few streets away before Jeff was able to talk again.

“Should we tell anyone about that?” he said.

“What are we going to tell them? There’s some giant black slug thing killing people so that it can eat their bodies?” she said.

“You think that’s what it’s doing?”

“I could smell embalming fluid from it. And they were all within a few streets of the cemetery when they died. How it did it and what it’s doing to the bodies to make the ground that hot, I don’t know.”

“Do you want to know?”

“Are you kidding? Of course not!”

They walked the rest of the way home without talking about it.

Breeze

Christine Riordan had a headache; it was part of the reason she was home for work and the other was the amount of vomit that she had coughed up in the last two days. No one wanted to see a police officer coughing up chunks on a street corner, it sent out the wrong message to the public.

Here she had stayed, at home, rattling around, having no idea what to do with herself. Feeling awful because she felt ill and because she could find nothing useful to do, but knowing that if she did find something useful to do she would be in no fit state to do it.

There had been a short while of thrill when she thought she might be pregnant. A thought that was quashed by the doctor telling it was

nothing more than a virus and that it would pass in a few days. Jeff had been more upset about that than she had expected, since it was he who had argued most against them having children for a while yet. She was yet to discuss it with him again.

At the moment, though, her malady seemed to have abated. The symptoms had become milder in the last two days, it was amazing what some sleep did. The headache had struck again with renewed vigour.

Sitting watching average mid-week television was doing her no good either, having spent the last couple of days cooped up in the house.

"I need some paracetamol," she said, rubbing her temples.

Jeff frowned and made to stand up, "Want me to get some?"

"I'm not an invalid, Jeff, I'll get it myself."

She stood up, giving him a rueful expression. For the previous three days she had been walking around the house in her pyjamas, slippers and dressing gown. Today, feeling more confident that she wouldn't be sick over herself, she had showered and dressed in jeans and a t-shirt.

"That wind's really starting to pick up," he said as she went to the medicine cabinet.

He was right, and something about it put her on edge. The wind had begun as a light breeze earlier, now it was howling in a gale-like way.

After taking the paracetamol she went back and sat with Jeff. The windows were rattling now as the wind pulled at them as though it were trying to get into the house and was moaning in frustration.

“That wasn’t in the weather forecast,” said Jeff, less concerned than Christine was.

“No, it wasn’t, was it?” she said and went to look out. The trees were swaying under the onslaught of the angry wind.

“What’s wrong?”

“Have you locked the front door?”

“No. I thought we would be heading out to the shops later.”

“Oh god!”

The front banged inward, hitting the wall and sending a shock through the entire house. Jeff jumped.

“What the hell was that?” He said as Christine rushed out of the living room.

A rush of frigid air barrelled past her, throwing her against the wall. The living room door was swung violently, causing Jeff to cry out in alarm. The doors in the rest of the house were also treated with similar violence.

She ran to the front door and closed and locked it. The rush of air slammed into her and pinned her against the door for a second.

It was doing her headache no good.

Jeff came out of the living room to see what was going on. The wind stopped pinning her to

the door and a moment later Jeff cried out in alarm as the wind pushed him back into the living room.

“Jeff!” She said.

He shouted again as if struggling against something. Christine, terrified that her husband was about to be killed, leapt up the stairs. With each step she took her head throbbed a little harder, she ignored it.

Something heavy thudded then something else broke in the living room. Another thud and Jeff cried out in pain.

That worried her as more commotion came from the living room. She was afraid that Jeff would be badly injured or even killed. She didn’t know what she would do if Jeff was killed, in their own home of all places, after she’d spent so long keeping out of the way of the things she had encountered that would kill him because he was associated with her.

She got to the living room and Jeff was being held against the ceiling by the whirling force of air. Ornaments and picture frames were being blown around the room by the gale – some whipped up and hit Jeff and some found their way to Christine.

As she watched, Jeff dropped a foot away from the ceiling and, to her horror, he was smashed upwards again with enough force to crack the paintwork.

Tears were no use, yet she could feel them try to force their way from her eyes. She had to think clearly enough to work out a way to free him.

There was only one thing she could think to do. She covered her face with her arm and made straight for him, ignoring the thrown objects and the powerful wind.

She smiled at him and then grabbed his arm. She pulled and he toppled to the floor, he moaned in pain. The wind rushed out of the room, causing her to stumble back, she pushed past it and knelt next to Jeff.

He looked terrified, but luckily he didn't look concussed or dazed.

"What just happened?" he said.

"I don't know, but I'm going to put an end to it," she said, a grim note in her voice.

"How? A gust of wind just tried to kill me!"

"I have an idea. We have to work fast and you have to trust me."

"I always trust you, babe."

She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and went into the kitchen.

"Anything flammable you can find," she said. She grabbed rags and an old lighter that she adjusted to the highest flame.

Jeff had an armful of bottles. She checked them and said, "Perfect! To the toilet!"

The wind rushed past them, they moved to either side of the corridor and pushed through it

and on to the toilet. She grabbed one of the largest towels they had from a cupboard.

Christine piled the rags, along with some towels that she disliked, in the centre of the ceramic-tiled floor and she and Jeff dowsed them in foul-smelling and flammable liquids.

"I hope these don't react and turn into mustard gas or something," Jeff said.

"They aren't going to get the chance," she said.

The wind whirled into the room. The sudden thought was that it would displace the pile of soaked material.

There was no worry of that; it seemed the weight of soaking them with the fluids was enough to keep them in place. She aimed the lighter at the pile. It went up instantly.

"Get out!" she ordered and pushed Jeff ahead of her. She could feel the living gale pull at the back of her t-shirt.

As she left the room, she pulled the door closed behind her and threw another towel along the bottom of the door and jammed it there. They pulled with their full weight on the door handle.

The wind began buffeting the door, but it seemed that it was already weaker.

"What's happening?" Jeff said.

"Fire feeds on air. We set a fire in there and it eats up all the air, including our windy

friend,” she said over the ever diminishing thumping and howling.

“What if it gets out the window?”

“We’ll be rid of it. I’m sure I closed the window.”

“Are you?”

“A bit.”

At last it went all quiet in the toilet. She looked at Jeff who shrugged.

“Moment of truth,” she said.

“You burned a couple of towels my mother gave us at our wedding,” he said before she opened the door.

“Yes, but sacrifices sometimes have to be made.”

“You never liked them, did you?”

“Don’t tell your mother.”

She opened the door and a waft of foul-smelling smoke rushed out and cleaner air rushed in. They both coughed and covered their mouths. The acrid smoke stung their eyes though. The toilet was dark, as the light had been destroyed by the fire.

All was calm though, it seemed that her plan had worked and her headache was gone too.

She hopped into the room and opened the window to allow the smoke to escape. She came out and shut the door.

“We’ll just let it air out for a couple of hours,” she said.

“Another one of your weird things,” he said.

“Yep, sorry.”

“Don’t be, it’s something else that I love about you. The only thing is...”

“What?”

“Now that the toilet’s off-limits, I’m desperate for a pee.”

Loam

She got out of the car, much to Greg's surprise. They were on a quick break and he had been wolfing down a large sandwich when Christine Riordan stepped out of the car and started walking away.

It took him a while to find somewhere to place his sandwich and get out of the car, by which time Christine had stopped and was staring at the ground.

"What's going on? We have to get back in a minute," he said.

"I'll have to look into this first," she said without looking up at him.

"Look into what?"

Christine crouched down to get a better look at what she was studying, Greg was too busy

staring at her to pay attention to what she was looking at. They told him down at the station that she was a strange one. He'd known that she was a little off-kilter, he had heard things about her that were downright creepy, the most spectacular of which was how she was there the day the tree exploded without warning in the town centre.

She was picking something up off the tarmac. He looked at it and saw that it was a clump of reddish-brown dirt with pieces of grass stuck in it. He screwed up his face.

"I hope that's not shit," he said.

"It's not," she said. "It's soil. Not from in town though. This has too much clay."

"How do you know that?"

"From the feel of it and the smell. The soil in town has been given a boost with fertilisers and bought compost. This stuff's nothing like it."

Greg frowned. This was weirder than he was expecting from her. He looked at his watch.

"I really think that we should be getting back," he said.

"No. We have to head out of town for about an hour," she said and stood up, walked past him and got into the driver's seat of the car.

"Hey!"

He scurried after her and clambered into the car as she started the engine. She flipped the half-eaten sandwich to him as he tried to fasten the seatbelt. Catching the sandwich clumsily in

one hand caused crumbs to fly everywhere out of the loose cellophane wrapper.

Christine smiled and said, "Watch the mess, Greg."

She peeled away from the kerb a little too fast for his liking. A few pedestrians were surprised by the police car's sudden jump into the road.

"Take it easy on the accelerator," he said.

"You're such a girl, Greg," she said, still smiling, and, he noted with quite a bit of alarm, without slowing down any. She was squeezing more speed from the car.

"Do you do this kind of thing often?"

"A bit. Usually not while I'm in the uniform though. This is kind of urgent."

"It was a bit of dirt. How could you put together something being urgent and that five-pee sized bit of dirt?"

"Call it a gift, Greg. Now shut up and eat your sandwich, I need to concentrate otherwise I'm going to kill someone."

You're going to kill *me*, thought Greg. He looked at the sandwich and realised he was no longer in the mood for eating it. His gaze was fixed in horror at the insane scene of driving madness taking place.

She eased off on the speed once they got out of town and into the more rural roads. Her driving became more careful as she considered which direction to take. She was muttering to herself a lot.

He considered telling her to let him out of the car and come back to get him once she was done with whatever it was she was doing. He thought she might just decide to forget about him and let him walk the three or four miles back into town.

“Where are we going?” he said when they had been driving around for fifteen or twenty minutes.

She kept muttering to herself and looking around. Her expression was one of deep concentration.

“I said where are we going?” he said again.

“Eh? Um. A field,” she said as though she had only just noticed that he was still in the car.

“A field? That narrows it down. Any one in particular?”

“Yes.”

“Do I get a clue where it is?”

“You’ll know when I find it.”

Again she started mumbling to herself. There had been a lack of certainty in her quiet meandering monologue just after leaving the town limits, now there was conviction and growing energy. She even let out a couple of sudden and worrying bursts of laughter. He took this to mean that she was close to what she was looking for.

The car was on a narrow dirt road and she pulled it in as close to the wall of hedges as she could and killed the engine.

“Is this it?” he said.

“Hm, not quite,” she said and got out of the car.

Greg sat in the car and watched as she looked about, checking in the fields at either side of the road.

She looked down and nodded. She walked away from the car at a quick and purposeful pace. Greg realised he was going to have to get out and follow her.

“Hang on!” He called when he got out of the car.

“Sh!” She hissed back and pointed at the ground while carrying on walking.

He frowned, wondering what she was pointing at, then shrugged and looked down. He jogged up to her.

“Are those mice?” he said and pointed to the things scurrying along the road.

“No. Mice tend to have ears, tails and legs,” she said as though it were the most normal thing in the world to say.

He looked at the rag-tag and uneven procession along the road. The things had a mousy shape, and so it was easy to think that was what they were, but as she said, upon closer examination they had no other mouse-like attributes. They weren’t even furry.

“Are those clumps of dirt?” he said. He was unable to believe that he had even considered the question, let alone asked it.

“Yes. Lots of little clumps of dirt making their way to one field,” she said.

“What has this to do with the muck you found in town?”

“That’s a bloody good question, Greg.”

“What has it got to do with you?”

She looked at him and gave him a mischievous smile. She dropped down and scooped up one of the moving lumps of dirt. She stood up again and examined it.

“It stops moving when you pick it up. That’s interesting,” she said. “I wonder if it moves again when I put it back on the ground.”

Before he could protest, she did. The brownish thing with little white stones through it began moving in the direction it had been before she plucked it from the ground.

“This is giving me the creeps, Chris,” said Greg as he watched the mobile bit of dirt disappear around a corner.

“You sound just like my husband,” she said and followed where the tiny mound of muck had gone. “We’re getting close to where they are going. This field up ahead, I believe.”

He thought it must take quite a breed of man to remain married to Christine Riordan if she pulled this kind of thing a lot. Then again, he might be as crazy as she was.

“Oh,” she said.

“Oh? Oh what?” he said, looking at her.

She pointed to the field ahead, her expression blank, as though she saw this type of thing all the time.

When he followed where she was pointing, he understood why she was crazy.

In the centre of the field there was a mass about the size of a double-decker bus hovering four or five feet off the ground. It looked somewhat liquid or molten, from this distance it was hard to tell if it was bubbling and dripping. He could tell that it was spinning slowly.

Christine walked to the loose stone wall bordering the field, much to Greg's horror.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"It's okay, we're safe as long as we don't get too close," she said.

"What if there's radiation or gas or something like that coming from it?"

"It's safe. And look at that."

Again he looked at the spinning mass and now that he was closer he could see the tiny clods of dirt jumping up into it and being absorbed. He could also see thin legs extending from the bottom of the thing.

"Why are they doing that? Why is that there?" he said, a plaintive, boyish note creeping into his voice that disturbed him.

"Damned if I know. And before you ask, I don't know what it is either."

They both stopped talking when a rook hopped onto the field. The other birds were

staying in the grove of trees at the far side of the field, watching. This one seemed to want to break away from the group.

The big black bird pecked at the bare earth and examined something that Greg couldn't see, before continuing towards the swirling mass of dirt.

Greg was unsure of what happened next. He noticed Christine jumped and that, as much as the movement of the mass itself, made him jump. The rook had vanished, leaving only one or two feathers floating to the ground from where the mass had snatched it and then engulfed it.

"Time to leave," said Christine.

"Shouldn't we tell someone?"

"Would you believe someone who told you there was a gigantic floating dirt monster eating birds in a field?"

"No..."

"Exactly. No one would know what to do about it."

"People have to know."

"Not really, they don't. In this case, they're better off not knowing. Although what it was doing in town is worrying..."

"How much do you know?"

"Enough to stop you sleeping for months. I wonder if the bird population in town has been affected..."

She started mumbling again as she walked back towards the car. Greg looked at her, then back at the thing in the field and shuddered. He would be drinking a lot tonight.

Leaves

Christine Riordan had come into the library ostensibly looking for an old cookbook, but really she just wanted to get out of the house and get a bit of peace and quiet for a little while.

Although she knew there wouldn't be much peace in the library the moment she walked in. There was some school class there and the teacher just had no control over any of the kids. The kids were running around and screaming, much to the chagrin of the other patrons and the library staff. When the library staff tried to stop the kids running around they were treated to some major abuse.

Part of her thought that the kids would no doubt calm down at some point, but they didn't and continued to get more rowdy. She sighed.

She would have to pull out the police officer card just to get them to quieten down.

As she was about to get up from her seat, one of the boys screamed. Maybe the little bastard had fallen and was hurt. It was a mean-spirited thing to think, but at least it would mean that the kids would either have to leave or they would become subdued.

Another one of the children screamed. A girl. Now she was concerned. That wasn't the scream of a child who was in pain – that was a scream of fear.

The screams had come from either side of the library. She decided to go to the source of the first scream. For the first time since she had sat down in here the place was quiet. It was momentary shock and soon there would be a low murmur of people wondering what was going on.

The teacher was standing some way back from where the first boy let out another scream. The woman was at a complete loss as to how to deal with this. That pretty much seemed to sum up the woman's entire teaching style to Christine.

The children who were surrounding the boy who had screamed tumbled back to get away from him. They were all terrified.

Christine knew that something strange was going on. It seemed that her urge to come to the library hadn't been as innocent as she

thought. So much for having a quiet couple of hours away from it all.

Christine tapped the teacher on the shoulder making the woman jump. Her eyes were wide and she held her hand up to her mouth when she turned to face Christine. The woman couldn't have been any more than twenty-five. She looked as though she was barely out of her teens.

Under other circumstances Christine might have put the woman's age at nineteen. Her reaction to what was going on, and the lack of authority she had over the kids in her charge made it seem as though she was still a stupid, frightened and uncertain teenager. Christine wondered how long the woman had been teaching for. She guessed she wouldn't be a teacher much longer.

"I'm WPC Christine Riordan," Christine said, going to her authoritative tone.

"I'm Diane Hill. I just wanted to bring the kids to the library to find..." the woman said and trailed off when she saw Christine's expression change.

"What's the boy's name?"

"His name is Darren Atkin."

"I'll see what's wrong and you go and check on the girl."

Diane stared at her. She was as terrified as the children. That was no use and it annoyed Christine that someone in a position of

supposed authority was proving to be so ineffectual. She felt a flash of rage.

“Now!” She said.

The woman scurried off to do as Christine instructed, seeming relieved that the burden of having to make any decisions was taken away from her. Again Christine reckoned that Diane’s career as a teacher would be a short and ignominious one.

There was no time to consider the downward spiral of the younger woman’s chosen career path.

Christine pushed past the frightened children. She now got a good view of what was going on.

The boy who had screamed was curled up on the floor, covering his head with his arms and was twitching. Blood trickled from several cuts on his exposed arms and hands.

He was surrounded by leaves. These leaves came from no stems or vines, they were just overlapping bunches. They had come through the wall and the floor. The thin, functional carpet and wallpaper of the library were torn by the entrance of the bustling mass of leaves and there were some piles of broken plaster strewn around the boy.

“Come on. Get back,” she instructed the children.

“Fuck off. I don’t need to listen to you,” said one little boy.

Christine rounded on the boy, her eyes blazing. For a second he was giving her a sly triumphant grin, until he made eye contact with her. He realised he had made a grave mistake in questioning her authority and looked away.

“You talk to a police officer like that again and you’ll be in trouble. You talk to *me* like that again and I’ll throw you out of a window,” she said. Some of the little girls giggled. “Now do as you’re told. Sit down over there and don’t move.”

None of the other children were brave enough to say anything more to her after that. There might be repercussions from this, but she was damned if she was going to let some child talk to her like that. Too many of them got away with it and she wasn’t about to be another adult cowed by stupid wrong-headed, if well-meaning, laws that made it impossible to control children.

And she and Jeff were considering having a baby. This might be something she would have to give more thought to.

That was a thought for another time.

She approached the boy and got a closer look at the leaves that had him hemmed in. The leaves were broad and heart-shaped. They shone as though they had a coating of smooth wax or they were made of plastic. Some had flecks of blood at their edges and she realised

that they had cut the boy. The edges must have been razor sharp.

When she got to within four feet of the strange plant it began to shiver. It seemed to be warning her to stay back. She didn't get any closer, but by the same token she stayed where she was.

"Darren? Darren Atkin? Can you hear me?" she said to the boy.

The boy flinched at the sound of her voice. She was grateful that the tight string of leaves did not twitch in that ominous way when she called to the boy. She had expected the wreath to close in on him with those impossibly sharp leaves.

"Darren, I'm going to help you get out of there, but I have to know if you are okay," she said.

"Get away from me, you stupid bitch!" Darren said. "You'll get me killed!"

At first Christine was shocked at the vehemence and nasty intent behind the boy's words. Then she was caught by surprise when the leaves pushed further out from the wall and the floor. They curled around the cowering child and hid more of his body.

The words the boy had aimed at her were quite adult, but his whimpering when the knife-like leaves closed in on him showed him to be the frightened child that he was. She was torn between feeling that the little creep deserved

that and feeling sorry because he was so terrified by his predicament.

“Look. You aren’t going to help anyone, let alone yourself, if you give me grief,” she said, keeping her voice even. “For the moment you stay in the position you’ve been in. I’m going to go check some things out.”

“Please don’t!”

“Don’t worry, Darren. I’ll be quick. I just need to do some looking around. You’ll be fine until I get back as long as you stay calm. Can you do that?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

The boy was sounding more like the child he was. She had a feeling that if Diane Hill was firmer with these children all the time the noise and lack of respect for other people wouldn’t have happened.

As she began to walk over to Diane the girl at the other side of the library began screaming in panic and agony. Christine sped up her pace. A few other patrons and staff rushed over too.

What she found was terrible. Diane was staggering back from what looked like a ball of leaves, there was a splatter of blood on her chest and face. Blood was pouring from between and beneath the leaves. The girl’s twitching arm was poking through and, as Christine watched, it was severed and fell to the floor.

Several people behind Christine screamed as the sliced-off limb dropped with an audible thud onto the floor.

Christine turned to Diane.

“What the hell happened?” she said. She felt angry with the woman for reasons that she couldn’t quite understand, other than her obvious lack of ability to control the children, and she was unable to keep that anger from her voice.

“She just kept talking, she told me to go away. That I should never have been a teacher. She said that she hated me,” Diane said and her voice was far away and relieved. “She always said that to me.”

Christine was reaching a conclusion here that she found unsettling. She studied Diane. It was obvious that she was a mousy woman, had probably been mousy her whole life for whatever reason.

She came to a decision.

“You’re coming outside with me for a moment. I have something I want to see,” she said and grabbed Diane’s arm. She then turned to the patrons and the staff and said, “Make sure those kids stay calm. And,” she pointed to the boy surrounded by leaves, “no one goes near him.”

There were some confused looks and some uncertain grumbles, but no one argued with her, recognising the authority in her voice. Some of

them had to have heard that she was a police officer too, and that would carry a lot of weight.

She made for the exit of the library. Diane went along with Christine with no resistance whatsoever and Christine found that even more unsettling.

The library was actually raised above street level. There were a couple of offices below. The rest of the weight of the building was taken up by a forest of pillars.

Christine dragged Diane to the approximate spot beneath which the boy was trapped. There was nothing here. If the plants had broken up through the floor of the library there should be a point of origin here. She looked up at the reinforced area where the boy must have been and saw nothing.

The plants had either burrowed through from somewhere else or they had originated from within the floor and possibly the wall.

Her suspicions were becoming more concrete by the minute. She took another look at Diane. The teacher seemed to be zoned out.

No, that wasn't it. She was uninterested. The picture forming in Christine's mind was getting uglier. She would have to check one last thing.

She dragged Diane back up into the library. She was glad to see that nothing more had changed and that everyone had obeyed her commands.

She wondered for a moment if someone had phoned an ambulance. If that was the case she would have to work fast.

She went up to a plump older man who worked in the library and who seemed to be less panic-stricken than anyone else.

"Can I see what's on the other side of that wall?" she said to him, pointing at the wall behind the boy.

"It's a storeroom," he said.

"Show me."

Following the man, she dragged Diane with her.

"Don't say anything to the boy," she said to Diane.

"But," Diane said beginning to protest.

"Not a word!"

They came close to the boy and Christine said to him, "Darren. Darren. Are you all right?"

"No. I'm scared."

"But you're not hurt?"

"No."

"Good. I've almost got this fixed so you sit tight."

"Okay."

Christine expected Diane to say something, but the woman said nothing while the man opened the door to the storeroom.

They all crammed into the dusty-smelling space and Christine studied the wall, poking her head out to the main part of the library to make

sure she was looking in the right place. She was and, just like the area beneath the floor, this wall was untouched. It seemed that the plants had originated within the walls and floor.

“Could you leave me and Miss Hill alone for a moment, please?” she said to the man.

He gave her a blank look. Then looked at Diane. Christine nodded to him, making sure he understood who was in charge here. She also wanted to do this as quickly as possible; she didn’t want ambulance people and her fellow police officers around for this. They wouldn’t understand the necessity of it.

Since Greg Jamison had quit the force there had been a lot of people watching her. He had gone strange after that day in the field, not that she blamed him. Her life did touch the weird a lot.

When the man finally took the hint and left, Christine turned her attention back to Diane.

“What you’re doing is very dangerous,” she said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Diane said.

“Don’t bullshit me. You did this. You didn’t think that it would be as extreme as it is, but you certainly did it.”

“You’re out of your mind.”

“How long have you been a teacher, Diane?”

“Two years.”

“Two years of getting all that abuse and not being able to control even one of those little creeps out there. No wonder you snapped. It must have been hell for you.”

Diane looked at Christine, obviously wondering if this was another case of her being mocked, or if Christine was being genuine. Christine did feel for her; the poor woman had gone into the wrong line of work.

“I was going to try to find something that would affect the parents. But nothing I could do would have done anything to the kids,” Diane said. “This was the next best option. Have something happen to the children when they were...unpleasant to me.”

“Where is it, Diane?”

Christine knew even before Diane looked at her that she wasn't going to get the answer she wanted. She strode forward and pinned Diane against the wall by pressing her forearm hard against her neck. Diane struggled, weakly, for less than a second and then went limp and compliant, something that Christine found more disturbing than if she had screamed and fought. Her calm expression and almost dead eyes were enough to turn Christine's skin to gooseflesh.

The search was short. She checked around Diane's neck, but neither of the two necklaces had what Christine was looking for. She checked the woman's pockets. Checked her handbag. Nothing.

It took a further pause to consider before she realised the one hiding place that Diane wouldn't expect anyone to check. Christine took a deep breath, not happy with having to do this, but it was necessary. Otherwise the boy through the wall was dead.

"It's clever place to hide something, Diane," she said. "I've never worked for Customs, but I've got no qualms about going in and getting it. I'll give you the chance to get it yourself first."

Diane's eyes lost their deadness, and panic took over. She glanced quickly at Christine and around in the wild hope that there was someone else in the storeroom that they hadn't noticed.

"It's just you and me here, Diane. And we aren't leaving until I get the damn thing," Christine said. She was bluffing of course, because if the ambulance and police arrived this was over. She was counting on Diane not knowing that though.

To her relief Diane's arms began to start moving. She was slow and robotic, as though she were in a trance. There was no sign of her making sudden movements. Christine stayed wary, ready to defend herself if Diane did try an attack.

There was no fight in Diane. She hiked up her dress and slipped her hands into her panties. Christine made sure she didn't look down as she had no desire to watch Diane awkwardly

manoeuvre her fingers inside herself. It was hard enough to watch the twitching expressions of concentration on the teacher's face.

At last Diane got what she was looking for and brought the object up to Christine's eyes, letting her dress drop back down. Christine couldn't help noticing how dry Diane's fingers, and the object she was holding, were.

As Christine expected, the object was about an inch long, half an inch at its widest and was in the shape of a leaf. It was made of a material Christine couldn't identify, or her mind wouldn't let her identify. It was grey and brown in colour and was quite fragile.

She crushed it. Diane screamed then and went limp. Christine took her arm from Diane's throat and let her drop to the floor, sobbing. Knowing that there was nothing further that could be done against Diane, Christine left the storeroom.

She was already formulating an explanation for the broken down teacher, the injured boy and the dead girl.

No one paid her any attention. Everyone was focused on the boy who was sitting up and looking around in surprise.

Darren looked at her though.

"Let that be a lesson to you, young man," she said. "Learn a little respect or you might not be so lucky in future."

With the boy sitting on the floor, nodding at her, the first siren could be heard approaching.

Visit

The doorbell went at about twelve noon. Christine Riordan had been staring at the clock and the moment the hands swung around to the vertical the doorbell rang.

It was an unexpected day off. There were still things involving the incident in the library that some people refused to let go of. The family of Diane Hill turned out to be a litigious bunch and were unhappy with Christine's handling of the event.

Since no one had much understanding of what had happened in the library it was getting trickier to get any straight answers. Christine had some broad understanding of what had taken place, but she wasn't about to try and

explain to her superiors or lawyers. As for Diane, she was still in no fit state to make any comment on the matter.

Christine knew that once Diane was able to communicate properly that she would have no idea what anyone was talking about. She wouldn't be a teacher again, she would be a different person and Christine hoped that would mean an end to the trouble this had all caused.

She wondered if this was something to do with that. Someone else eager to speak with her about it to get some extra angle that would either save her or screw her. The only way that she would save herself was by sticking to the simple fabrication and saying nothing more.

The doorbell rang again. No, this wasn't someone else trying to prise some insight from her that they wouldn't have the faculties to understand even if she did explain. This was something different.

Being unexpectedly stuck in the house had left her at a loose end, so this was something of a welcome distraction from her boredom. She marked her place in the book that had sat open in her lap for the last half an hour and went to the door.

As soon as she left the living room she noticed something odd. The closer she came to the front door the damper the air seemed to become. Cold moisture settled on the skin on her hands and face and she could taste it in the

back of her throat. She rubbed her hands to get rid of the cloying film.

Any other time something like that would make her hesitant about continuing, but she felt safe enough to carry on and open the door.

A fine mist seemed to be carried in by the wake of the swinging door. It was cold, just like being hit in the face with a plant mister.

The man standing on the doorstep was all of five feet tall. He wore a long grey coat that seemed to drape over a very thin frame. His trilby was tilted back at an odd angle revealing a straight, solid black hairline. Shining black tendrils of hair fell out of the back of the trilby and lay on the man's shoulders, curling and winding like vines down his chest.

His grey-blue eyes glistened with a deep intensity. Christine was sure that she could see actual light within the blackness of his pupils – tiny white sparks or shimmers, like something silver catching the light under water.

“Hello, Missus Riordan,” he said and when he smiled he revealed teeth that belonged to someone, or an animal, much bigger than he was. “I am Mister Poltos. May I have a word with you?”

“Sure,” said Christine and waited.

“I think it would be much more preferable if I were to come in and discuss this matter with you, Missus Riordan.”

He looked up and the smile slipped. She realised why his hat was at such a high angle on his head as he scanned the sky. The urgency and vague sense of fear with which the man did it made it tempting for Christine to peer up at the overcast sky too.

“Are you a lawyer, by any chance?” she said.

Poltos looked at her and seemed to be bamboozled by the question and then he laughed, saying, “Oh, the library. No. I represent a different agency. One not quite so linked with the legal profession.”

“Why should I let you in then? I’m kind of busy here. I’ve got a lot going on.”

“It is in your best interests to allow me in and speak with you. Shelter isn’t perfect, but it makes things easier and we are terribly...exposed out here.”

“Exposed to what, Mister Poltos? I’ve found being indoors doesn’t provide the protection that you might like.”

“*Please*, Missus Riordan. I’m fully aware of the things you know and what you have been exposed to. There will be time enough to discuss this inside.”

One thing that Christine had come to learn over the years was that even though someone might look uncanny, they would generally be just as mundane as everyone else when you looked hard enough, but this Poltos’s physical

strangeness was matched by less definable oddness.

She stepped out of the way and let him in. The dampness followed him and was enough to catch in the back of her throat.

“You aren’t going to leave damp patches on the furniture are you?” she said as she closed the front door.

“I won’t be sitting, so you have no fear of that, Missus Riordan. My unique aura has a lot of advantages, but being friendly to furniture isn’t one of them.”

“That’s very considerate of you. Do want tea or coffee?”

“Water, since you offer. Thank you very much.”

She guided him into the living room and went into the kitchen. The offer of a drink was as much to give herself a bit of time to think as it was about being a good hostess.

As strange as the man was, there was nothing overtly threatening about him. He wasn’t human, that much was clear. He looked like a man, walked and talked and acted like a man, but it was either a disguise or he was something that looked human.

Given the endless procession of the bizarre that she found herself dealing with in her own tight little location in the world, she wasn’t surprised that there would be things out there that most people had no idea about and yet

were surrounded by. Other, parallel races wouldn't be out of the question.

Poltos wasn't from around here though. She was certain of that much. He had travelled from out of town to meet with her, and she wondered why he would go to all that trouble.

Trouble – that made her uneasy. Poltos might not be inherently dangerous to her, but whatever made him stare at the sky in such a nervous fashion might be worth looking out for. Then again he might simply be paranoid, and since he had so many human similarities that wouldn't be outside the realms of possibility.

Perhaps she should have been more wary about the fact that he knew that she had experienced, and was attuned to, so many odd things. After a very short though, she decided this was of minor, almost negligible concern to her.

Once she had filled a glass full of water, she took a look out of the kitchen window at the sky to see if she could discern anything that might be hazardous.

Yes. There was something up and out there. Something that was waiting and watching. It hadn't been there before Poltos had arrived at her door, but it was there now, big and real and unpleasant. And no one but she and Poltos knew that it was there.

Time for some answers, which, in itself could be a welcome change, were the great dark

watcher in the sky not looming. You couldn't have everything.

Poltos had his trilby off and was staring out of the living room when Christine came in with the glass of water.

"Who's your friend?" she said.

"One of the things that I need to talk to you about," he said and took a gulp of water that drained the glass. "Thank you. Slightly too chlorinated for my taste."

"I'll phone the water board and tell them."

"I'm sorry, that sounded ungrateful. You had no reason to let me into your home, or even to be as kind as to offer me something to drink. I am nothing more than a strange little man who exudes dampness after all."

"Well, you've got yourself described down to a 'T', but you haven't answered my question, Mister Poltos. You're stalling."

Poltos put his glass down. He fidgeted with his hat. He glanced out of the window again. The curious, almost officious confidence that he had shown while standing on the doorstep was gone and the nervous fear that had flashed when he looked at the sky replaced it.

"I know that thing out there is a big deal. I know that it's never been there before. I know that it's probably dangerous too," she said and stared hard at Poltos. "What I don't know is: what that thing is and why it's here."

“It is incredibly dangerous and followed me here.”

“You brought that monstrosity here?”

“In part, but it would have found this place in due time anyway. It is one of the things that it does. It seeks.”

“What does it seek?”

“Places. Places like where I’m from and places like this. These are the fertile places it needs to feed.”

“I’m not going to like what it feeds on, will I?”

“It depends on how you feel about the strange things that you have seen and experienced.”

“It can’t be capable of eating it all.”

“It doesn’t act alone though. What you are sensing is the vanguard. What is swirling among the clouds is a scout – feeling the way ahead for its brothers and sisters.”

“I’ll be safe though.”

“Yes, you and all those you love too. None of the mundane denizens of this little town will come to any harm. Only the strange things that you know of and have shown to others will be obliterated in the feeding frenzy.”

“You’re not giving me much to worry about here, Mister Poltos. I’ve wanted it to be quiet in my head since I was a little girl. This ability has tied me to this place. Even when I was training to be a police officer, this place kept calling me back. It would be nice to be able to

move somewhere else. Get away from the strangeness.

“Anyway, I’ve never been a crusader. I observe. I go and have a look. Most of the time I don’t get involved. Most of the time I *can’t* get involved.”

Poltos laughed at that.

“It’s amazing what you will make yourself believe because you think the alternative is too difficult,” he said. “You entered law enforcement for a reason. You had to find a way to become involved.”

“You know a hell of a lot about me. I don’t like it.”

“I’m not here to make you uncomfortable, Missus Riordan and I apologise. There are channels some of us can access. Someone like you doesn’t go without being remarked upon.”

“I don’t like that either. What if I want the extra chattering in my head to go quiet? It would be nice to just hear my own thoughts without some weirdness screaming for my attention.”

“I expected you would say something like that. It isn’t that simple.”

Poltos’s gaze bore into her and the brief sparks within his eyes became bright flashes. Engulfing flashes and blinding if they were now exploding within her head.

When the light subsided there was emptiness. Blankness of a kind that she couldn’t begin to

fathom. All around her were shadows, endless beyond a dead horizon with a black sun and a black moon spinning above.

Shuffling across this plain of darkness were numberless shadows. People carrying on, eating, breathing and breeding, but with nothing else. There was no creativity, no enjoyment, just existence.

“The strangeness of this world needs humanity as much as humanity needs the strangeness,” said Poltos. “Humanity may have spawned many of the strange things in this world with their wild creativity, but some of these things sustain humanity’s creativity. Symbiosis on an incredible scale.”

The vision vanished and Christine was left staring, dumbfounded at Poltos for several minutes.

“I’m not Buffy the Vampire Slayer. I can’t save the world,” she said at last.

“No one is asking you to,” said Poltos. “You are a rarity, Missus Riordan, but you are not unique. I can’t force you to do anything and I don’t want you to feel that way. There are others who would stand against such terrors. I came to show you what would happen if no one had the courage to do that. So that you may protect your own corner of the world when these things move in.”

Christine walked to the window and looked out. The nameless thing was still there. It was intent on her house.

“This feeds on whatever you are,” she said. “That’s why you’re so bloody scared.”

“Yes. It does. We can and have fought back, but I’ve lost a lot of friends and family to it.”

“It’s so damned big.”

“Yes, but not so big that you can’t turn an army of them away.”

When Christine turned around, Poltos was putting his trilby back on.

“I’ve taken up enough of your time, Missus Riordan,” he said. “I do hope you consider what I’ve told you with due care.”

“I’ll be lucky to sleep tonight,” she said as she followed him to the front door.

“I apologise again. It wasn’t my intention to worry you. You have a while to prepare, for whatever you want to do.”

“Yeah. Thanks. Do you need a lift?”

“That’s very kind of you, Missus Riordan, but I have my own transport.”

Christine looked up at the sky when she opened the front door to let Poltos out. The feeling of the unnamed thing in the sky was even greater. Poltos followed her gaze.

“Don’t worry, I got away from it to make it to you, I can escape it again. Goodbye and good luck.”

He melted. His body seemed to become part of the air and he was gone.

“Bye,” said Christine and closed the door.

Other Tales

Lieutenant

It's all so easy.

In the alley the old man looks through piles of paper and bin bags. The smell is awful. So much waste with an insect, only discernable because it is larger than the rest, rummaging through it. It is sickening. Such brief lives and they chose to rake through the detritus of others.

I was certain not to fall into that trap. I always excelled in my endeavours. It is why I became great.

It would almost be enough for me to feel pity for this creature. He is prey. He will be my sustenance for the night.

He has no idea that I am watching him. Like the rest his credulity stretches only so far. My

form clinging to the side of a building is outside that boundary. None of you would consider looking either.

I can hear his blood pumping. It is thin. Alcohol and other poisons in his diet have done irreparable damage. His heart labours even though it is under no strain greater than that of his normal life. The rasp of his breathing comes close to drowning out both for me.

His life is meagre. It will be put to better use by sustaining my life. His death will be a mercy, no more suffering for him. As if my intentions were so benign. I need to give no justifications for my feeding habits. I have no regrets.

I am so far away from my homeland now though. The memory of leaving my beloved Walachia behind is the closest that I ever come to regret. The warrior days were long over. As ever my general was the example that I found myself following.

England never called me as it did my general. The explanation that he was searching out some lost love is preposterous. We were warriors, men steeped blood, our only love was power and its acquisition. Women were fleeting.

As all human life is.

He wanted to add to his old empire. It would prove to be a mistake. Those who learned of his nature feared him. So they hounded and

destroyed him, just as he would have done to anything that threatened him.

His expansion was a failure – and a lesson for me. I moved south. The dark lands were an interesting diversion. Like my general, however, I was drawn west.

The old man is moving away now. This alley lacks the seclusion I require to do my work. He is moving into darker areas, this suits me.

I leap onto another wall. I can feel the tidal forces change as I land. I channel the energy into keeping myself clinging to the brickwork and cloaked in silence. Those who live in this area of the city have been trained to be unobservant, however there are always those who have yet to be so beaten that they make sure they see nothing. Some are still concerned.

I realised that my journey would take me across the Atlantic and to the New World. I knew that there was still enough of the wildness that was in my own old home that I could live with very little harassment from the types that destroyed my general.

It has always been will that has driven me, as it drove my general. Thoughts of gods and other such powers are for fools. My power is my own and that which I take from the elements. I refused to die. There was no curse. I am held by other constraints though, ones that I abide by with no complaint.

The passing of the day has a greater affect on me, my power waxes and wanes with the setting and rising of the sun. My power will always surpass that of any normal human, even at my weakest.

I feed. The life that is in blood gives me energy. My bite is not laced with a virulent disease or poison. My blood contains nothing of the sort either. It is will. If I require servants, it is my will that extends their lives too.

There is none of this sentimentality that my kind has been saddled with. I have no concern if there are others like me. I do not yearn for the time when I was human. I was always more than human.

I press myself against the wall. The old man is scuffling with another of the homeless creatures that populate this warren of alleys. They are fighting over alcohol and who was rutting with one of the sow-like women.

I have become a chameleon amongst these creatures when I am not hunting them. I weaned myself from the need to sleep on the soil of my own land. I discovered it was nothing more than a psychological crutch, a weakness that my general was unable to throw away. I never sleep.

At times, I feel that I have fallen, become something so much less than I should be. What I once was. In centuries past there would have

been no furtive sneak-killing of these downtrodden creatures. I razed entire villages of their houses and their occupants with no fear of reprisal.

It was my right.

Now I hide in the shadows of ill-walked parts of a huge city, culling the sickened herd. They are found in the river, months later and there is no more mourning for them than there is for waste in which they root.

The fight is over. The two men shout at each other, both through blooded mouths.

That tang of blood on the air is exhilarating.

My prey is alone deep in the maze of alleys. Out of the way of the eyes of those who might care. He is now doomed.

Lighter yet than the loose papers that catch in the wind, I drop close by him. I bid him good evening.

He starts and then looks at me. He greets me with the name that I have assumed for the last few years. I am affable, harmless.

When the claws and fangs that I can create from my malleable form rip out his throat, his surprise is quick. He dies without a whisper.

I lap at his blood. I strip flesh from him. I am so engrossed that the clicking of the policeman's gun startles me.

The man is young. His eyes filled with proper fear, for I know that I am a terrible sight when I feed. The gun shakes in his hand.

A voice that should be commanding squeaks like a teenager. He gives orders that I ignore. I could kill him. He would be dead before he had a chance to fire the gun.

His partner, on the other hand, would have ample time harm me, and he harder eyed, more ready to act. The bullets would not kill me, but they could cause me a great deal of damage. I am furious that my occasional feeding is interrupted. I bare serrated teeth and use the tidal force that I had stored before to become mist.

The reports of the weapons are painful in themselves to my sensitive ears. I am glad the mist is less sensitive to the sounds. I feel the projectiles pass through the diffuse mass I have become.

Tonight there has been a change to my existence. It is time to move on. My concealment is over.

One day, however I shall rise again and will no longer need to hide. I will take or, better, be given all that I want. I plan for that day.

Clearance

They have been cutting down trees. At first I found nothing to be worried about there. Now they are doing it often and in the strangest of places. And it has escalated.

I can see why they would want to remove trees that are close to railway lines. Safety is a good concern. However I've seen patches of trees being cleared in places like parks and in the middle of the countryside. Arbitrary clumps in the middle of nowhere, of no danger to anyone, torn down for no reason.

One day I watched the workmen doing the clearing. They weren't dressed like normal utility workers. They were too clean for a start.

Watching how organised and how fit they were, I guessed that they were military.

It raised a lot of questions. Mainly what was a local council doing hiring military personnel to do what should be a landscaper's job.

There was something sinister, not just about the obviousness of these men's military training, but the way they conducted themselves. So intense and focused, as though what they were doing was the most important job in the world.

Everything about them discouraged anyone to approach. Even if they hadn't arrived in black vans with blacked-out windows, they were scary and intimidating. The precise nature of how they took the trees down and the fact that they worked without exchanging any words made them seem robotic.

I watched them one day when I had nothing else to do. They took the trees apart in the same way each time. The branches were removed with remarkable alacrity and then the tree was chopped into four pieces. Every time; from a tree barely six feet tall to one that was fifty feet tall, always four bits.

Each piece was loaded into a big black truck that had no markings. The lack of accountability gave me a cold feeling in the pit of my stomach.

When one of them turned to look at me, I had to dig deep into my self control to not scream and run off. I walked off as nonchalantly as I could manage as three of them stared at me,

their blank faces betraying no curiosity, anger or satisfaction and for all that they were even more intimidating.

Getting back home I called the council. The reception I got was a cross between denial and subtle threat.

I was left feeling even more disturbed and worried. All over some men cutting down trees. It seemed preposterous.

The preposterousness has both lessened and become greater since the same group, or a group that is very similar, have started to demolish houses.

It began one day on a row of houses a few streets away.

There had been no warning that they were being torn down. The houses were still occupied. Even as the men began to rip the walls down with the black-painted demolition gear people screamed. The men didn't care that there were young children in the houses.

It was a terrifying sight to behold as the bulldozers knocked down the walls as, from the clouds of dust and debris, mothers with their children came running and screaming.

I had to do something. I marched up to one of the men and demanded to know what was happening.

The man turned and looked at me. His eyes were blank, as though he were looking at an illusion, something that wasn't quite there. I

felt as though I were some vivid figment of this man's imagination.

The stare caused me to stutter. I managed to inject outrage into my voice as I pointed at the continued destruction of the homes. I stammered to a halt as it was obvious I was getting no answer.

An instant later I was on my back on the curb. My face was throbbing from the blow I never saw. I lay there with my eyes spinning, looking up at the sky, trying to work out what had happened.

My view of the sky was blocked by the man's stocky silhouette. He told me to mind my own business and to get out of there. All said without a hint of intonation.

After a moment I scrambled to my feet and hurried back home.

I haven't gone out much since and more houses and trees have been taken down. There has been nothing in the news about it. As far as I know no one has asked why it is happening.

I don't understand and I am petrified.

A Happy Man

“Yes, it is such a wonderful day. Glorious!”
The unseen man said.

Robert had gone out for a quiet walk. It was a boring Sunday afternoon and he thought that instead of staying at home, sitting in the garden, that he would take advantage of the sun and get some exercise too.

The voice came from behind a car parked close to an area of waste land. There was no one else around, which he thought was somewhat strange right away. On a nice day like this he would expect there to be at least a few people out walking dogs or doing what he was doing, just strolling along and soaking up some sunshine.

"I mean, we've been so lucky with the weather this year," the man said. He was cheerful.

Robert wondered who the man was talking to because he couldn't hear anyone answering. He may even have been addressing Robert, although he saw no reason how this could be the case, as the man couldn't see Robert and Robert was certain that he hadn't seen the man.

"But I do love the rain too, the heavier the better. Soaking you to the bone and you can run home, dry off and get some warm, dry clothes on. That's a magic of sorts," the man said, his musing was punctuated by chuckling.

Robert frowned. He was tempted to walk on by and allow the man, and whoever his companion may be, to have some privacy, but he was curious.

He made his way slowly to the car and as he got closer, he could hear something scraping along the ground. Something metallic against the tarmac paving.

"Oh," the man said, as though just noticing something. "We'll have to fix that. It shouldn't be a big problem."

The car rocked a little on its suspension and there was that scraping sound again. The man chuckled again. He was amused by something, so that whatever required to be fixed wasn't that much of an inconvenience.

“We should be as comfortable as possible in everything that we do. Discomfort is always such a distraction, I find,” the man said.

Robert got to within a couple of feet of the car. He could see the back of the man’s head and he was bent over something.

From here the smell hit Robert. He gagged at the sudden strength and pungency of the stench that hit him. It was so powerful that he had to lean on the car to stop himself from falling over in a faint.

The car creaked under his weight. The man spun around in surprise.

The expression that Robert was faced with was a mixture of surprise and despair. The man’s livid face was streaked with blood and tears. The tears were still flowing.

Unable to stop, Robert advanced further and saw that the man was drenched in blood and he was hunched over an eviscerated woman’s corpse. The man clutched a gore-caked stick in one fist and held the chest cavity over with the other.

Robert’s vision swam with revulsion.

Through a face hardened by terror, despair and shock the man said in a cheerful voice, “I find that the best colours for interior walls are neutral tones.”

Without another thought, Robert ran the way he came.

Incremental Misery

Ten hours ago he had been a computer programmer. Eight hours ago he was sitting in his nice warm flat, minding his own business, scouring the internet for porn. Four hours ago he decided that he needed a few things from his local shop.

How he came to be elbow deep in mud, tasting blood and more foul things, he had no idea. Where his clothes had gone was a mystery too. He was afraid and confused. The encroaching chill did nothing to alleviate the mental fog.

He needed his glasses. Even though it was too dark to see, the slight comfort that they would bring him would have been welcome.

Almost in answer to his desperate thought his groping hand found smooth plastic. A further

quick movement confirmed that it was, indeed, his glasses. One leg and one lens of them. No use.

Even so, he groped in the foot-deep muck to find the matching half. As he expected he found nothing that even resembled half of his ruined spectacles.

He moaned in despair. He wanted to cry again. He couldn't. Two solid hours of crying left him empty of tears.

He groped in the darkness, his muscles aching from fighting against the cloying mud and the cold. Someone, or something, must have hit him the ribs too; they felt bruised and when he breathed stabbing pain banded around his chest.

The last thing he recalled was leaving his flat, talking to his neighbour and then walking out into the street.

When he had awoken, naked and lying in freezing mud he had called out, demanding to know where he was and who had brought him here. He had yet to receive an answer. There had been no echo returning to him.

The lack of echo disturbed him most because it suggested that he was outside, but there were no stars above him. There was weak, diffuse light. So diffuse, that there was no way to determine where it was coming from. It proved that he could still see. Whether that was a good thing was in doubt. All he could see was a field of undulating mud and his own nudity. Any

more than that was outside the range of the light and consigned to a cover of darkness.

For the first time he heard something that was not his own voice or the slurping of his movement in the mud.

He stopped as much movement as he could. He shivered with the cold that took up most of his thinking.

Something else was moving in the huge field of liquid mud. His voice was too hoarse to call out and determine who else was out there.

He was somewhat thankful of being unable to say anything. The newcomer to the mud could be dangerous. The newcomer may be one of those who brought him here.

The relief of thinking that he was no longer so alone here melted. Being as vulnerable as he was he wanted to draw no attention to himself.

Fighting was something that he did when he was a child. Since becoming an adult he had never raised his hands in aggression to another human being. He was a weakling, most physical activities had long since stopped being a priority for him.

Trying to defend himself against all but the least imposing of opponents was out of the question. He knew he was at too much of a disadvantage to put up a proper defence.

The sound was closer this time. He was sure he should be able to make out some kind of shape, even through the gloom and despite the

factor of his bad eyesight. Something large was coming towards him.

Even though he spun through three hundred and sixty degrees, he saw nothing.

Running seemed to be the only thing he could do right now. He had no energy to do that. Flailing in the mud had robbed his limbs of any force that they had ever had.

Now there were more things moving. As if in response to his internal admission of weakness, these things were on the determined move.

He screamed when he felt something, that had to be metal, clamp onto ankle. The sound was short and hoarse, cut off by the shock of how it sounded.

There were no more opportunities to scream. A huge heavy thing, cold and metallic again, drove him face-first into the mud.

After a moment of struggling he managed to get his mouth and nose out of the muck. He was gagging. He was blinded by the mud.

The weight on his back was relentless and allowed for no struggle. His one attempt was met with a further bearing-down and almost drowning until he stopped.

Either the thing holding him down was huge or there were several of these things surrounding him. It was hard to tell from the blurred silhouettes that he could discern as he struggled for breath.

Something moved at his rear. He tensed at the proximity to his anus. The object moved closer. It was metal too, cold and sharp. Unbelievable pain shot through his body as the spiked object was driven into his anus and tore the inside of his colon.

He screamed. Mud rushed into his mouth and nose. The pain made that easy to ignore. It was only the beginning.

Special Attention

The next knife was less kind. The fine blade entered between the bed of the nail and the nail itself.

Agonised screeching filled the room as blood dribbled from the ruined end of the man's finger. The blade was pushed on further until it scraped bone.

The man was crying and pleading. He received nothing but sneers and verbal abuse.

How could they do this? was the question he shot at his tormentors over and over.

His answer was the knife being jerked up with enough force the split the flesh and skin to reveal the bones beneath. Like an exotic, yet unpalatable fruit, peeled to show the white seeds within.

The leader, the woman, smiled at him and held his gaze – remarkable as he was weeping and his eyes were clouded with pain. She had known him for years. They had all known him for a long while.

Now, here they were, being filmed live and given an array of implements. They had been provided an hour to use as many as they could.

He was breathing deep. Panic breaths. She smiled and nodded, it was all so perfect. She reached for the hammer and chisel.

He screamed when she approached. The thought of the sound he would make when she began shattering his kneecaps was almost enough to make her orgasm right there.

Jar

“He said it was dead when he found it. Found at the bottom of a jungle valley in Papua New Guinea,” the guide said.

Robin and Martha looked at each other and grimaced. The thing in the jar was an ugly specimen, all scrunched up, twisted and softened by almost two hundred years of being preserved in alcohol.

“It’s an elaborate fake of course, but one of the best of its kind,” the guide said when the quiet was threatening to go on for too long.

“A fake?” Robin said, deciding to play along.

The guide seemed fittingly relieved that someone else was talking and taking an interest in the exhibit.

“Absolutely. Randall Killin insisted that it was real, but he was well known as a fraudster in the sideshow circuit,” the guide said. “The work on this is exceptional though. There isn’t even a hint of stitching anywhere.

“It’s clear though, that there are dog, monkey, shark, crow and iguana body parts constituting this chimera.”

Robin tapped the jar, causing the suspended beast to wobble in the yellowish solution and said, “Why don’t you just take it out and have a look to make sure?”

“Staff suggest it every couple of years, but it’s thought that it would be too fragile,” said the guide, whose voice showed that he disapproved of touching the exhibits. “It would probably disintegrate once it was taken from the jar and, even though it is a forgery, it’s also a historical piece. Destroying it beyond repair just to find out what we already know about the workmanship behind it would be too high a price to pay.”

Robin looked at Martha, she gave him a smile. They had wanted to come to America for years. This was a fun trip and this visit to an out of the way little museum was just the kind of difference to make it extra interesting.

They would be returning to New York City later. Getting out into upstate New York was something of an enlightenment for them. Robin had always assumed that New York was

the city and there was nothing else to it. Now they had travelled out into the farmland and heard how the accents changed as they moved away from the city.

This little museum had the air of a place that was quite unsophisticated, however once they started looking at the exhibits and how they were displayed, it was clear that a lot of thought, time and money had gone into making the place as good as it could be.

Paying the twenty dollars for the guided tour was well worth it.

They, and the rest of the group, were moved away from the jar and the guide went onto the next series of exhibits. The tour lasted an hour, after which they were allowed to wander around and take in the unusual collection at their leisure for a while.

Robin followed Martha back to the jar with the pickled chimera. She stared at it hard.

“What’s the matter, love?” he said.

“I don’t know,” she said. “There’s something about this thing.”

“It’s a funny little relic from a simpler time. A time when a conman could fleece an entire town and be considered a hero for doing it.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“You heard what the guide told us about the erstwhile Mister Killin, he called himself that because that’s what he aimed to do.”

"I know. This just seems different from the other things in the collection from his sideshow. Creepier."

"That's saying something, love. Some of this shit goes beyond creepy."

"This is different."

"It's okay now, times up. Time to head back to the city."

As he led her away from the jar, he started. The thing's eyes had opened, locked on him and closed again.

"Robin?" Martha said.

"Nothing. Seeing things," he said with less cheer.

* * *

That night as they lay in the hotel, Robin woke in the middle of the night. Martha was undisturbed by the scuffling sounds coming from the toilet.

He took care not to wake her when he got up to investigate. It was chilly, but he saw no reason to put on any clothes. It was sure to be his imagination, fuelled by seeing the strange museum pieces earlier in the day.

There were sounds coming from the toilet, there was no denying it.

He picked up the wooden chair that came with the room and went to toilet door. It

wouldn't make much of a weapon; it might be a useful shield.

He gritted his teeth and hoped the squeaking of the doorknob turning wouldn't disturb Martha. She muttered, turned and kept on sleeping.

The snuffling grew louder now that the door was open. He kept the chair in front of him like a lion tamer and flicked on the light.

The thing from the jar that afternoon was sitting close to the toilet bowl. It turned to him when the light went on and bared its jagged teeth. It still dripped with the alcohol used to preserve it and it still looked dead.

With a hiss, it had leapt up over the chair and bit into his face. This time he had no thoughts about disturbing Martha's sleep as he screamed. Her screams soon took over his.

Perfect Television

She prepared herself in her dressing room the way she did every morning. She applied her own make-up and fixed her hair, taking great care that everything was in its place and was in no danger of becoming messy. That would destroy her image as the most perfect face on daytime television.

While she made her final few adjustments, there was a knock on her dressing room door. It was almost time to begin today's show.

She stared at her reflection. Perfection. Well, almost, there was some thicker foundation to cover the crow's feet that had begun to appear around her eyes and blended with the flesh tone under her eyes to cover the dark rings caused by lack of sleep. Some foundation was misplaced by the fine hairs on her face.

These were things that only she would notice, but they bothered her nonetheless. Nothing that could be done about them right now.

She sighed.

The holdall sitting next to her seat rustled and what was inside made a bleating sound. It was as if it wanted her to know that it was there. No chance of her forgetting; she was too excited to forget. This was something that would be remembered for a long time. She giggled to herself.

Taking the bag, she left the dressing room and walked to the studio. Her co-presenter was already sitting waiting for the programme to begin. He threw her a quizzical look when he saw the bag she was carrying. A look he repeated into Camera One.

There were a lot of strange glances aimed in her direction as she had her microphone and earpiece put in place. No one said anything to her though.

She sat down, knowing that she looked perfect to everyone else and carefully placed the bag at her feet, making sure not to damage the contents.

The producer mumbled a question about the holdall and she told him he would have to wait and see. It was a surprise. He wasn't happy with the answer. He said there were some funny sounds coming from it. She ignored him.

There was no time for the holdall to be taken away. Not even the floor manager could get to her in time to take it away.

They were going live.

The cameras began running and her co-host greeted the people at home, as did she. The producer was still complaining in her ear about the sounds coming from the bag. She ignored him and smiled into the cameras, just like she always did.

Today she was going to give the audience something that they had never seen before. It would be a spectacular and unexpected piece of television and would ensure that she would be part of the channel's history.

For the moment, the show would run as normal. What she had in mind was so far from the scripted programme it would blow people's minds.

The news, the weather, the celebrity interview, the health section and the gardening section went past. She could barely stand the interminable nature of the wait.

Then came the cooking section of the programme. This was the part that she had been looking forward to.

She hauled the bag over to where the guest chef was doing something that looked overly complicated and unpalatable to her. She shoved the confused man out of the way and when he tried to get back on camera she swung

the largest knife around at him and he backed off, still spluttering in indignation, but too afraid of getting close to her for fear of being injured.

The atmosphere in the studio changed. Everyone had been uneasy since she entered. Now a note of fear crept among the crew. From the corner of her eye she could see her co-host shifting in discomfort.

She wondered how they would feel about this in a week's time.

She put the bag on the counter and opened it. She took out her baby son and laid him on the counter while at the same time knocking the bag onto the floor.

All the while she smiled into the camera. Everyone stared in shock at the snivelling baby. She wrenched out her earpiece as her producer howled in protest.

She introduced the viewing public to her baby son. The baby whined as he lay on the cold counter.

She lifted the knife over her head and sank it deep into the baby's belly. Her son howled in pain. The crying stopped abruptly when she jerked the knife, with practiced expertise, along the soft body, splitting it up the middle.

The action caused her to be covered in blood. She knew this was going to happen and was willing to make the sacrifice. Her outfit and make-up were ruined.

Now she placed the knife next to the twitching corpse of her infant son and smiled into the camera. The only sounds she could hear now were some stunned gasps, the buzzing of the lights and her own calm breathing. Even the producer had been rendered silent. The cameraman in front of her was riveted and incapable of moving the camera from her.

Her smile didn't change as she reached into the torn open body of the baby and pulled out the small heart. Without taking her eyes from the reflecting lens of the camera, she bit into the salty and coppery tasting heart. It was tougher than she expected, but her perfectly crowned teeth worked through it and she swallowed it down with the still-warm blood that was within it. She finished the heart.

She picked up the knife again and hacked at one of the pudgy legs. This seemed to be a signal for the stunned crew to do something. She could hear the faint tinny screaming of the producer calling for them to go to commercial. The chef rushed up to her and this time she slashed him with the knife.

The chef screamed in pain and staggered back. She tore a chunk from the baby's thigh with her teeth. Slashing the chef was enough of a distraction for her to be tackled from behind and wrestled to the ground.

She had succeeded in her purpose. She had given the world something new, something that

had never been seen before. Her greatest achievement wouldn't be tempered by going to jail. In fact, it would strengthen her legendary status. She was satisfied.

Waking Up Cold

There was a gun pointing right in her face. She was lying on her back in a darkened room. She could feel the cold opening of the muzzle resting against her chin. She had no idea who was holding the weapon on her.

The image of the weapon was clear in her mind even though she couldn't see it.

The back of her skull felt smashed. She was certain she was in danger. The room was cold and had no windows.

Visual details had to be taken in by rolling her eyes while keeping her head as still as possible. The effort obscured the dark room with flashes of red and white.

Moving could cause whoever had the gun to fire.

Her head felt like it was full of feathers.

Lying there on the concrete floor she decided on a course of action.

The first slight twitch she made with her hand sent shocks of pain up her arm. She had to stop herself from jumping with surprise.

What she planned to do required her to make whoever her assailant was think that she was still unconscious. Then she would move quickly.

It had to be now.

She grasped the gun with one hand and with the other she sought out the trigger guard.

There was no finger to push out of the way. Her own finger slipped onto the trigger. The gun went off.

A Little Good Deed

Breaking into a house is easy and any moron with a big enough utensil can do it. What takes skill and panache is breaking into a house quietly enough that you don't disturb the occupant.

I like to think of myself as having a more than a modicum of grace even though the work I do involves brute force. This piece of work was fiddly, but I managed to work the lock open with the small tools I had taken with me. I'm proud that I did it while wearing a pair of thick gloves (I used to think that a pair of rubber surgical gloves sufficed, but I read that identifiable finger prints could be pressed through them), and my hands are big enough as

it is. Then, of course, practice does make perfect.

The door swung open and the only sound it made was a swish as it passed over a carpet. After a pause I shut the door behind me and relocked it.

The hallway was lit only by light that escaped from under a door. I waited for my eyes to become accustomed to the darkness and see if my mental image of this homestead was similar to the reality.

Details solidified before me and I was surprised by what I was seeing. The carpet I had heard upon entering was thick and expensive, and I'd even go so far as to say it was a recent purchase. Without moving from my position just inside the threshold I absorbed some other details that crystallised from the gloom. The décor was simple, and although the exact colours of the walls were beyond my abilities to see in the gloom, I suspected they were neutral hues. There were a couple of small prints hanging on the walls. I took a look at the closest and was pleasantly surprised to find that it was a reproduction of the work of a splendid modern artist.

I was impressed. Almost impressed enough to turn around and leave and to give up on what I was intending to do. The surge of anger in my gut straightened my wavering resolve – I was here for revenge.

There are lots of times when I think of Leigh, of that time when I first met her, and that moment, standing in the low light of that hallway, was one such time.

* * *

She was twenty when I met her, I was in Battisti's, a café I often frequent and she was sitting in one corner, alone. She had a flow of auburn hair cascading over her shoulder and beautiful green eyes that were tinted with sadness. I had to talk to her, to know what could make such a gorgeous young woman look so melancholy. I also like to think of myself a Good Samaritan, as I hate to see anyone or anything suffer for no reason, and Leigh looked as though she was suffering terribly.

And, there was no denying that I was also attracted to her.

I walked up to her table and said hello. She looked up at me, puzzled. For the first time I could see the glistening sheen of tears, I was shocked and asked if she was all right.

The tears escaped their prison and charged down her cheeks. That trickle became a torrent and suddenly she was sobbing.

There was no way I was going to allow her to stay there in her misery. Thinking about how easily she let me take charge, pay for the coffee

she left untouched and when she agreed to go home with me, showed how delicate her emotional state was. I wonder why she trusted me, especially after what she had gone through. Perhaps my small kindness of concern overrode her normal defences (I fear what would have happened to her if someone less scrupulous than myself had found her). She could never adequately explain it herself, but she was always grateful.

So it was that I took her back to my home. She was dazed, I offered to make her some coffee, but she declined. She did, however, accept my bed, on which she slept for twenty-three hours, and so forced me to sleep on my couch.

The next afternoon when she came wandering into my living room she didn't know where she was. I hoped that the revelation that she had found herself in a stranger's house wouldn't upset her further, but she once again reacted to my kindness and for the first time I saw her smile. The beauty that radiated from that gesture is something I will never forget, it was as if light from her soul could not be contained inside her body and had to be released through that heaven-sent smile.

We talked for a while about nothing at all, I guessed she was avoiding some subject, and it wasn't my place to press for any answers. I

gave her my number if she wanted to talk to someone.

Even as she left I knew I had to see her again. The thought consumed me and destroyed my concentration so much that the manager of the butcher's in which I work was worried I would injure myself.

I was happy and relieved when she phoned me three weeks later, we spoke for a long time this time and she told me that she had been living alone after moving out of her parents home six months before to attend university. In short, she was lonely and could she meet me. Naturally I was more than happy to accept the invitation.

So began our affair. She was hesitant at first, and almost afraid to get too close to me, I think she was scared of me in a way. I am an intimidating sight, I'm six feet two inches tall and I weigh two hundred and ten pounds, but this was not the reason she was afraid.

I wanted to know what pained her so that she felt she needed to keep a certain distance from me, though I stopped short of asking her, feeling it would be impertinent and counter-productive to the relationship we were building. Besides, she would tell me in her own time. That time came after we had been seeing each other for four months.

It was the middle of the night and she had stayed over. We had dozed off in each other's

arms as we often did, but that night I was awoken when the heat and weight was absent from my arm. Leigh was sitting up, shrouded in darkness, but I could tell she was weeping. It was then that she told me what had caused her sadness and distance when I first met her:

She had been raped the night before I met her. By someone she knew and thought she could trust. He'd gone to her house to talk about some course work. Before she knew what was happening he was on her: pulling at her clothes; gripping her flesh; pressing down on her. It was over, she said, in a few short minutes and he left.

My first question was: why didn't she contact the police?

She told me she'd considered it, along with a lot of other things. Up to and including leaving university. That was what she spent that week after I had first met her doing – thinking over the possibilities. The deciding factor was that her attacker's father was an influential lawyer. She decided she could not go through with a trial or even the initial police probing, best to show her tormentor that he wouldn't beat her.

In those intervening three weeks she had found out other things about this man, none of them pleasant – he was a sadist and a bully, his ex-girlfriends had at first been reluctant to divulge details, but eventually told tales of beatings and harassment. They went on to talk

about his generally violent behaviour and how the combination of wealth and a father who practiced law kept him out of jail and the newspapers. While she made these inquiries she went for medical examinations, to make certain she was not diseased or pregnant. Neither proved to be the case.

I held her tight then and vowed to myself to do something. I guessed who her tormentor was, but I'd have to get the man's name from her to be sure and that took another month in which I made sure Leigh was all right and avoided asking any challenging questions. My query came as a casual piece of conversation, and she was instantly begging me not to go and beat him up. I told her that I would do no such thing, and I kept my promise.

I however, had some things to do.

* * *

So there I was ready to affect my revenge on this vicious little bastard who had hurt the girl I loved – and missed – so much. How could I have questioned what I was doing? This evil man must pay.

I looked at the print. I reached up and took it from its place and put it onto the carpet, face down. Art should not have to see what I was about to do, even if it was a reproduction. I flitted along the hallway, taking down the other

prints and placing them on the floor. Once I did that I stayed still and waited for any sounds that would suggest he had heard me.

I heard no such sounds. In fact all I could hear was the sound of a television blaring out football commentary from behind the door from which I could see light escape. I crept over to the door and listened at it, I could discern nothing but that infernal television.

I had to take a chance, so I reached into my coat pocket and carefully extracted my homemade cosh. It was a handful of pennies bound tight in Clingfilm and placed in a sock. I took care when I dangled the implement, just in case a loose penny jingled. All was going well. I was as quiet as a fly's breathing.

For the first time sweat popped out on my upper lip, from the heat and the knowledge that I was entering this room blind. I was counting on the shock of my being there to work to my advantage.

I turned the door handle and with a violent jerk swung the door open, ready to swing my cosh at the first person I saw...

...And found no one. There was only furniture in here, nice furniture, but furniture nonetheless. For a dumb second I tried to find anyone. Then I thought I had been found out, that perhaps he had heard my entry after all and was ready to ambush me, and tie me to a chair

and torture me. The notion caused my heart to race even faster.

I was given a reprieve when I heard the toilet flush, a muffled sound over the television and though the walls. There were precious seconds that I could ill afford to waste. I shut the door, paying attention to closing it fully. I wanted the occupant's suspicions aroused as little as possible.

The pictures! What if he noticed the pictures? My impulsiveness could prove to be my undoing. I have found that most people rarely take much interest in their home surroundings, that they are only backgrounds to their lives. I, on the other hand, am constantly looking. I think how your house is set out says a great deal about you and I only want to tell people so much about myself. I had found some small details that reminded me of my own tastes in his décor. He may notice the prints lying on the floor.

I forged ahead and secreted myself behind the door. And waited.

The toilet door opened. I heard the man sigh. The sound of his voice sparked more anger and my heart raced again. I gripped the sock harder.

I couldn't hear his footfalls. The television was too loud. I waited. It took a long time. The hallway could be no more than five feet wide,

yet he was taking an eternity to cross it. Was he lost?

Had he decided to go to the kitchen? If he had he would most certainly notice something was wrong.

There was nothing I could do but wait.

The television continued blabbering.

My sweat turned sticky.

My heart thudded.

Come on!

The door handle moved. The movement was so unexpected that I jumped. My body went stiff, and then I took a breath, tried to relax. I was ready to act.

He opened the door and casually walked into the room. It was obvious then that even if he were expecting me he was too physically outmatched by me to pose a problem.

I swung the cosh. The cushioned impact sent a stunted shockwave up my arm. The weighted end thumped into the nape of his neck and he straightened and then crumpled to the floor. I had no intention of bludgeoning him to death, as that could get too messy, even with a cosh. Oh, though the temptation was there. I may be a butcher but that doesn't mean I relish the sight of blood – or cleaning it up.

There was no way I was going to remove my gloves to check his pulse, so I took out a small mirror – that I was carrying in the same pocket as my cosh – and positioned it in front of his

mouth and nostrils. The reflective surface turned cloudy. Good, he was still alive.

I went to the television and ripped the power cord from it. The silence that came with the set's dying was blissful. With this roughly torn length of cable I bound the man's hands in tight coils. Once I was satisfied he was secured I lifted him over my shoulder and went to check the toilet. I was pleased to see there was a bathtub in there into which I dropped the man. I placed his head under the cold tap and ran it onto his face. He came coughing and spluttering to consciousness in less than a second. He blinked and looked at me, bewildered.

He asked questions in a tremulous, fear filled voice, he sounded like a child. I could almost pity him. Then with some bravado that was laughable, he threatened me with legal action. I laughed at him and he shrank down into the bathtub. I told him that he must atone for Leigh's suffering.

He feigned ignorance at the invocation of her name, but I could see in his eyes that he knew to what I referred, the guilt glittered like a horrible little gem. I shook my head and pulled out the last things I had brought with me, a clear polythene bag and a heavy elastic band.

He whimpered into silence when he saw those items. As I brought the bag over his head, he started to cry and he even went so far as to offer

me money; but I was even less responsive to bribery than I was to lies. The polythene bag cut off the scream he was about make and the plastic moulded to his face. I worked quickly to secure the bag with the rubber band. He struggled for a while, trying to loosen the execution device by squirming against the smooth sides of the bathtub, I considered removing the bag to allow him a breath before putting it back on, however I decided against it. I am a vengeful man, but I am not a great sadist. I waited a further fifteen minutes after he stopped moving before removing the condensation-filled bag from his head.

He looked so peaceful, as peaceful as Leigh had been when she sucked in her last breath after I sedated her. She had too much grief inside her, it tortured her every night, so that ultimately I could no longer allow her to suffer, so, as part of my good deed one night I slipped a couple of sleeping pills into her food and drinks and waited for her to sleep before placing a clear polythene bag over her head for an hour.

Afterwards I drove a good distance north and buried her in a remote forest, it pained me to end her life, but my pain was salved by the thought that I was helping her. Now with her torment and tormentor gone my little good deed was complete and, as I always did after

performing my Good Samaritan's tasks, I felt great.

Wade

His feet stuck to the floor, tracking blood along the varnished wood. A length of intestine, held in his hand with little care, trailed through the puddle of red, leaking foul-smelling fluid from the torn end.

The ragged flaps of flayed skin which he had stitched into his own flesh moved and undulated awkwardly as he surveyed the house. He was oblivious to the pain in his chest, his arms and his legs from where he had pierced himself so often with the needle. He was happy with the work he had accomplished here.

Four dead people. Their blood was mingling with his own. His armour was almost ready.

He dropped the length of intestinal tubing in the corner of the room with other examples of human offal. The stench was inspiring.

He hefted the man's thigh bone that he had cleaned of any muscle. He would remove the blade of one of his knives and install it in the bone to create a fine weapon that would compliment his marvellous armour.

With the blood that splattered around his crotch and the tops of his thighs drying, he went into the kitchen and laid the bone and the knife down on a counter, he would collect the rest of what he needed later.

The night air was cold. He was even colder due to the moist blood pressing against his skin. The small river was a few yards away from the isolated country house and that would be even more chill again.

Confident of not being seen he walked the distance to the river. He placed a hand into the fast-flowing icy black water. He pushed through the urge to recoil from it and stepped into the roiling water. He gasped with both the shock of the cold water and because the water stung his self-inflicted wounds.

It was necessary to clean his armour and he submerged himself. The many tiny wounds made his nerves sing in pain for a few minutes and then the pain subsided into a dull throb. He stepped out of the water and the cold air caused his wounds to sting again.

No matter, the pain was as cleansing as the water. And cleansing was his mission. Once

he created his weapon he would begin the mission in earnest.

Desiccate

The operation had been undertaken with less finesse than Hilary liked. Digging down so far was a difficult task, she had been told and there was nothing for it but brute strength. Burrowing through hundreds of feet of Egyptian sandstone was not work for delicate researchers with tiny picks and brushes.

Even though she had to concede to some of the logic, there was no one on her team who could ever accuse Doctor Hilary Vincent of being a delicate researcher. In her late thirties, six foot two inches, robust and with disarming good looks that photography could never capture, she was as likely to be swinging a pick axe or driving a bulldozer as she was of hunkering down and brushing dirt away from finds with gentle strokes of a brush.

Discovering a place in the Valley of the Kings was something of a coup. No one ever suspected that there were deeper catacombs until she discovered that there was a pattern in the hieroglyphics of the tombs. A code, of all things.

She had always been a vocal opponent of conspiracies and hidden codes in ancient writings, so finding one for herself came as a great surprise to her and to her fellow academics. The surprise was so great that some people thought that it was a hoax. She assured the world that there was no prank going on. She showed the research and field evidence to some of the greatest figures in the archaeological field. They had to agree with her findings; the evidence was too compelling.

That was most of a year ago now. Here she was, on the verge of discovering what it was that was hidden deep in the hills of the Valley of the Kings.

The encoded message spoke of the kings as being set as guardians of some type, they were set to keep something terrible from being released again. What was so awful was only hinted at in the writing, they seemed to have no words to describe it. The only description was that it was a terrible menace.

The pains to which the ancient Egyptians had gone through to make sure that this great menace stayed forever buried showed that this

was no metaphysical or metaphorical threat. This was something that caused physical terror in those who drove it down there. The huge lumps of rock they used to block it in were an ample demonstration of their eagerness.

That was three thousand years ago, however. There was no way that anything could have survived down there for that length of time.

"I hate this fucking heat," mumbled Rutherford.

"You hate everything about archaeology, Rutherford. You've never been interested in discovering things from an ancient time that could illuminate the present. You're only interested in the revenue it could bring once it's displayed in a museum," Hilary said to the curator.

Rutherford was here as part of a contingent representing several museums from around the globe, all wanting to see what Hilary was about to uncover and put claims on it for future display. Hilary suspected Rutherford also worked for more private interests.

"As you so astutely put it, Doctor Vincent, I'm interested in the bottom line. That is part of this archaeological dig," he said.

"No it's not, you smarmy little toad."

"That's no way to talk to someone who could be paying your wages."

"You? If I ever woke up in a world in which you were in a position of power over me, I'd

put the biggest calibre gun I could find in my mouth and pull the trigger.”

“I suppose a date’s out of the question.”

She was barely aware of her arm shooting out and clubbing Rutherford on the jaw. She recognised the impact, but it was when she looked down at him on the ground, his eyes rolling, that she realised what had happened.

“Someone get a medic for Mister Rutherford, he’s fallen over. He may have hit his head,” she said to one of the interns.

A couple of people helped the semi-conscious man to his feet and led him away as the rumble of the last few dynamite charges came through the ground. She wished Rutherford had been on top of them.

She tromped down to the main part of the site without waiting for the all-clear.

“Hey, Hilary! Wait up!” Said David Wilson, as he chased after her.

She turned and bid him to hurry up. She wasn’t what could be considered a patient teacher. These people were out here to work, but David’s puppy-dog enthusiasm for what he did managed to charm everyone working on the site. He was a good archaeologist, diligent, intelligent and hard working.

The only thing that was somewhat annoying about him was that he harboured a crush on Hilary. Nothing wrong with it, but he did such an awful job of hiding it. And there was

nothing about him that appealed to her romantic side. He was a pleasant guy and any girl would be lucky to have him, but she wasn't interested.

The overly studious, short and unathletic type had been something that appealed to her when she was in her late teens. Now she had no idea if she had a type, however it was certainly not that, and poor David epitomised it.

"What happened to Mister Rutherford?" he asked when he caught up with her.

"He had a bit of a funny turn. I think this weather's gone for him. He's from Alaska, you know, not at all used to this kind of heat."

"I thought he was from Ohio."

Hilary sighed and shook her head. Another reason why she could never be too attracted to David was that his earnestness led to a lack of a sense of humour. Irony was often wasted on him. Sarcasm might as well be town in Spain. Subtly absurd humour was a lost cause.

"How close do you think we are to this new chamber?" David said as they walked on. It was obvious to Hilary that he was uncomfortable with the silence.

"Well, given the resonance imaging we've done, this last round of dynamiting should be it for the large blocks of stone."

"Do you think there will be gold in the chamber?"

"I doubt it. The Egyptians who sealed it off were pretty scared by what they left in there. I

don't think we'll find a hoard of gold and jewels down there."

"I don't understand that. What would be so dangerous to the Egyptians that they felt their only way to deal with it was to bury it?"

"If we knew that I don't think there would be much point in trying to dig it up. We have the thrill of discovery here, David. There needs to be a lot of patience with that too, though."

"I think our patience will be paid off, Hilary. I have a good feeling about this. I think we'll find something unique down here."

"David, I think you're right."

With that she clapped him on the back, taking him by surprise. He was ruffled by it, but gave her a silly grin.

A stream of dust was flowing from the entrance to the cave that was the start of the downward sloping tunnel leading to the long-buried chamber. Workmen wearing hard hats were peering into the obscuring haze, trying to see if there was anything major gone wrong.

"Hey, Doctor Vincent," said the foreman. "Looks like the blasting was effective."

"It better not have damaged anything irreplaceable."

"You've made your feelings clear about using explosives and heavy machinery, but even you have to admit that there was no other way to do this."

“I don’t have to admit anything, Gunnarson. I’ll have someone’s balls if anything older than a decade, other than those rocks, has been destroyed down there.”

“You’ve been working closely enough with us on the operation to make sure that hasn’t happened. This is a skilful team we have here. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

Hilary just grimaced. She was unconvinced. Anything of a thousand things could go wrong where using high explosives was concerned. She would reserve judgement for when she could see the site herself.

The cloud of smoke and dust took an hour to drift off or settle enough to allow the new passage to be excavated. Hilary put on a hard hat and was one of the first to begin moving the loose debris.

That job took until late in the next day, it was backbreaking because there was no way any of the heavy equipment could be brought in to move the loose rocks. Hilary had to tell David to go and rest as he was obviously in a lot of pain from trying to keep up with herself and the workmen. His build discounted such major physical labour.

There was a lot of coughing among everyone in those two days. Even though they were wearing dust masks and had plenty of water, they all complained of having dry throats. Hilary felt it too.

At last the passage was cleared enough to allow proper exploration. The narrow tunnel was crowded. A confusion of torch beams illuminated the walls.

Hilary could feel Rutherford's gaze burning in the back of her neck as she read the new hieroglyphics surrounding the bricked-up doorway at the bottom of the passage.

"What do they say, Hilary?" said her old friend Doctor Jason Werner.

"I'll only get a rough translation down here," she said. "It still talks about something that the kings were placed above to guard. Still a lot of talk of fear, but now there's mention of death too. A thing that thirsts."

"Do you have any idea what that could mean?"

"No, Jason. I'll take some photos of these pictograms and make a more detailed translation when I have some books around me."

Jason walked past her and slapped the sandstone brickwork blocking the doorway to the chamber beyond. It was tight and solid, she knew.

"They really wanted to keep whatever it is down here. There are no spaces between the bricks to allow the passage of air through," Jason said.

"Perhaps at the time they were jammed in place. At the bottom a few spaces have formed.

Although any living thing in there would have suffocated within days of being trapped down here," Hilary said.

"Do you think it's something living that they locked down here?"

"I couldn't say for certain, but I'm suspecting it was."

"Your suspicions are leading dangerously into the territory of fantasy. A territory you once denounced."

"I know, and I'm embarrassed about it. I hope I'm wrong about this. Discovering two things that go against all my beliefs in a year would be too much for me to handle. It may force me to take up a more womanly pursuit like hairdressing."

Jason laughed as did some of the rest of the assemblage. She was sure Rutherford would be one of the ones keeping quiet.

She wasn't surprised that he went along with her lie of feeling faint in the hot Egyptian weather. Even though he looked like a malnourished accountant, he would still be too proud to admit that a woman knocked him out with one punch, even a woman as singular as Hilary. He would seethe and try to find some other way to get back at her.

Photographs were taken of the entrance to the chamber and of the hieroglyphics surrounding it. There was uneasiness among the crowd

mixed in with the excitement of finding something new.

Hilary felt the same discomfiture and tried to analyse it. There was no rationale behind it. She felt that something bad was waiting behind the bricked-off doorway. It was impossible that there was anything worse than a long mummified corpse waiting to greet her and her team there. Perhaps it was the fearfulness behind the ancient writings that was influencing her mood now. It was unlikely, but it was the best explanation she could offer herself.

They returned to the surface to have an impromptu celebration. There was champagne and beer and singing and people who would never look at each other that way finding themselves locked in intimate embraces.

Hilary had one bottle of beer and watched the festivities with a slight smile. She had to stifle a smile when she saw the married Rutherford disappearing into a tent with one of local girls who volunteered on the dig. Hilary was certain the girl would regret it in the morning. More proof of what a nice guy he was.

It was proof of something else.

There was an edge to the party that Hilary found a bit alarming. It was as though they were partying away on the last day of their lives. There was desperation in the consumption of alcohol and the consummation of heretofore unexpected pairings. It made her

glad she was sober. She would no doubt have found herself doing something that would be silly, embarrassing or blackmail-worthy by Rutherford.

“Hilary! Hilary! You look wonderful tonight!” David said in a careless slur. He draped himself over her shoulders.

“Thank you, David. You are extremely drunk,” she said to him.

He frowned as though he didn’t understand what she had said. He shook his head and almost fell over.

“I’ve had a few little beers,” he said and created a tiny space between the tips of his thumb and forefinger.

“Those few little beers have almost robbed you of your ability to stand up. You should drink some water and get to bed. We have work to do in the morning,” she said. “I hope there are people in a fit state to do anything tomorrow.”

“I ca- I can still stand! I can do a lot more than that.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes. Come back to my tent and I’ll show you.”

David’s clumsy, drunken attempt at lasciviousness was almost comical. She carried him back to his tent, avoiding attempts to kiss her.

“You wait there, David, I’ll be back with a surprise,” she said.

“I like surprises,” he said as he began to unbutton his shirt.

She walked out of his tent and left him to it. He would be asleep in a short while anyway, given the state he was in. She needed to sleep too.

As she had expected she was in the minority of people around the dig site who got up early. She was still part of a three-strong group working on the bricked-up chamber entrance when noon passed.

Gunnarson was the first to make his bleary way down to the chamber entrance. Hilary was loosening the brickwork with a sledge hammer. He winced with each blow.

“Enjoy yourself last night, then?” she said. Her dust mask hid a sly grin.

“I think so. I don’t remember much, so I must have had a good time,” he said.

“That’s good.”

“I think I need three more days of sleep though.”

“Well if you feel like it, go ahead. Don’t expect to be paid for it.”

“My union would make sure I got something. I’d claim an unavoidable hazard of the job.”

“Yes, jamming three bottles of beer in your mouth and draining them all is a hazard I often have to face in the field. Get to work.”

More people drifted down into the tunnel, all looking rough and all complaining that they felt rough. All except David, who stayed quiet and got on with dusting down the entrance of the chamber.

At first Hilary thought he was avoiding her out of shame, but he turned and smiled at her with that puppy-dog devotion. He had been paralytic the night before. She suspected that the memories would surface soon enough, right now he was in a happy little honeymoon period of forgetfulness.

Her skin was itching. The sensation had begun a half an hour after she started working on the bricked-up doorway and had become worse as the hours wore on. It was getting unbearable now. The few who had started with her were scratching at their arms too.

She also had a sore head and that was getting excruciating.

Something rare was about to happen, going against her frontline reputation. Hilary was going to be the first to leave the main part of a dig site.

“Everyone who started with me this morning, let’s get out of here and have these filthy hedonists do a little work for a change,” she said.

There were some confused murmurs and Hilary beckoned for those she had addressed to follow her out.

“Is everything okay, Hilary?” David said.

“Yes, David. You keep at it.”

She deflected the questions from the two interns as they walked up and out into the camp.

“We’re all going to see the camp medic. I think there may be some irritant in the air down there,” she said.

“Why didn’t you tell everyone?” said an Asian intern.

“I didn’t tell everyone just yet, Aki, because I didn’t want to panic them. And they need a kick in the ass after last night.”

The two interns laughed. Hilary was in a less jolly mood, she had felt uncomfortable down there even without the itching. This, and the schedule of the dig could be impaired if there was some kind of contaminant in the tunnel. Neither factor pleased her.

She looked the two interns over. She made no comment about what she saw.

The camp medic was another earnest person. Hilary wondered if she could cope with one more earnest personality.

Miriam Juno possessed the sense of humour that David Wilson lacked. She could still deaden a good one-liner with a blank gaze of incomprehension, but for the most she would laugh when Hilary was trying to be funny. Hilary was thankful of that small blessing.

“Hello, Doctor Vincent,” said Miriam and was about to say something more and stopped short, her expression showing concern. “What’s happened to your arms? All of you. And your faces too.”

“Yes. It’s been happening since we’ve been down at the tunnel. What do you think it is?” Hilary said.

“I’ll take some swabs and send the samples to the nearest hospital. It looks like you have eczema or psoriasis. Have any of you suffered with those conditions before?”

Hilary and the interns all said no.

“This is weird. And this only came on when you were in the tunnel?” Miriam said as she took the skin samples from the three.

“Yeah. It was getting worse the longer we were down there.”

“Are there people down there now?”

“Yes. Time to get them out?”

“Without a doubt. Until we can work out what this is, we need to keep people away from there.”

“I’ll go and do it.”

“No. I’ll do it. I don’t want you to be exposed again to whatever it is that’s causing this. Put some of this ointment on in the meantime and rest up.”

This was the kind of thing that archaeological nightmares were made of. Some old contagion getting out into the world again. The worst

thing about it was that it would postpone the revelation of whatever was in that chamber.

She was thirsty and she grabbed a litre bottle of water as she went to her tent. She drained the bottle as she read through her notes. She was still thirsty and got another one. This too, she drained and a remarkable thing happened, her skin stopped itching. Even the dry patches lessened, becoming less tender.

The ointment that Miriam had given her was left untouched and forgotten until Hilary realised that the dryness of her skin had subsided. The headache was gone too.

She went to find the two interns who had been with her. She found them in the medical tent speaking with Miriam. They looked as though they had gone through a similar miraculous recovery. Miriam looked mystified.

"I don't understand it. I'm sure that kind of damage would have taken days to recover to this extent," she said as she checked Hilary. "And you didn't use any of the ointment at all?"

"I didn't even put my fingers in it," Hilary said. "I was very thirsty though. I got through two litres of water."

"I drank a lot of water too," said Aki.

"Has anyone else complained about similar symptoms?" Hilary said.

"I've heard a lot of complaining, but it's from most of the camp being hung over. Nothing

like the symptoms you, Aki and Ken have displayed. Well, except maybe Gunnarson.”

“He must have been down there an hour,” said Hilary. “Ken, go and find Gunnarson.”

Gunnarson looked apprehensive when he came back with Ken. Hilary could see some red patches on his arms and forehead.

“What’s going on?” he said the moment he entered.

“That’s what we’re trying to find out, Gunnarson.” Hilary said. “Drank a lot of water since you came out of the tunnel?”

“A little more than I would have if I wasn’t hung over.”

“Any changes in your skin?” Miriam asked.

“It was a little drier and itchy. It’s fine now though.”

“We need to find out what’s in that chamber,” said Hilary.

“We can’t. There’s a factor down there that seems to be dehydrating people. It’s too much of a risk,” Miriam said, trying to exert some authority.

“That’s exactly why this needs to be done as quickly as possible. We have to find out what’s doing this and I think it has something to do with that chamber.”

“You could make this much worse.”

“It’s something that’s easy to recover from, Miriam. The most I foresee happening is that there will be a higher level of contact and we

have to get out quicker. We should take water down there with us.”

“The higher level of exposure could make recovery less likely, Hilary.”

“I want to know what’s doing this. We get out quick once we’ve broken through. We work in teams to minimise the exposure. Are you up for that, Gunnarson?”

“It sounds reasonable to me. It shouldn’t take too long to break through if we aren’t trying to be careful,” he said with a shrug.

“For once, all I want is brute force,” Hilary said.

“I want it known that I think that this is very unwise,” Miriam said.

“Your objections are duly noted and duly ignored.”

Hilary, Gunnarson, Aki and Ken left the tent and went to round up more people.

“Doctor Vincent!” Called Rutherford. He sounded annoyed.

Hilary told Aki and Ken to get everyone, and she turned to face a furious-looking Rutherford.

“What’s this I’ve been hearing that the dig is being suspended?” he said.

“You’ve heard right, but it’s back on,” Hilary said.

“What? What about this contaminant?”

“That’s why we’re pushing things forward a bit. To get to the bottom of that. You won’t be

losing any money that way, Rutherford. Right now we have to get working.”

She and Gunnarson left Rutherford standing looking confused and suspicious. Hilary couldn't care less if Rutherford was annoyed at her.

At the cave entrance to the tunnel they all waited. Instructions were given. None of the teams were to be down there for any longer than half an hour at a time. Using the excuse that she had been exposed the longest Hilary was in the third team to go down. The real reason was that Gunnarson guessed the third team would be the one to break through. She wanted to be there for that moment.

As the first two teams came back up Hilary got the impression that they were using up quite a lot of water. She was uneasy about that for some reason.

It was her team's turn to go down. They carried more water down and, as predicted by Gunnarson, the sturdy barrier of sandstone bricks was ready to crumble.

After an hour of people sweating and toiling down here, Hilary noticed that the air was dry and cool. She looked at Aki, Ken and Gunnarson and it was obvious that they were thinking the same.

Already, she was feeling the itch starting.

“Let’s get this over with,” she said after taking a long gulp of water that made the itch subside.

Fifteen minutes later they were through and into the chamber. They all started coughing the moment the area was revealed. Long draughts for the water bottles cured that too.

Hilary’s bad feeling about this was deepening, she charged through it and the open doorway of the chamber.

The first thing her torch beam fell upon was a leathery corpse at the far end of the chamber. Yellowed, ancient teeth glinted in the light. The corpse was wearing armour of some type and carried a bronze sword and shield.

Hilary’s eyes were stinging now and the itching of her skin was increasing at a faster rate. She went to drink more water and found that the bottle was empty. She was sure that it was a quarter full five minutes before, after she had taken her last drink.

“What is that?” said Aki, with a slight note of panic in her scratchy voice.

Hilary looked to see where Aki’s torch beam was pointing. She felt panic too at what she saw.

It was something like an altar or a sarcophagus, fifteen or so feet long and about four feet high, and sitting on top of a three steps adding another foot and a half to the height. It was plain but for the sculpture on the top

surface. It was a relief of something lying on its side, something that was far from human, it was too spindly and too big to be human. The head was misshapen too, elongated with lobes at the front and the top.

The face, though, was what attracted her gaze. There was ugly hate there. An unthinking snarl twisted a mouth full of jagged, hooked teeth too long to be human.

As the horror of the thing's appearance settled on her, the surface of the thing changed texture. Around the large contorted eye, the sandstone smoothed out, changed colour to a glistening grey-blue. The eye itself seemed to sink into a pool of shimmering red shot through with yellow. It blinked.

Just before Aki screamed, Hilary was sure she could hear a deep rumble of breathing resonate through the chamber.

Aki stumbled away from the thing in the sarcophagus, tripping and throwing the water from her open bottle into the air. In the swinging beams of the torches Hilary saw the droplets of water disappear. She swung her torch back to the sarcophagus and the creature's head became that amphibian-like grey skin. The teeth became pure white and the jaw began to work it time with that rumbling breathing.

"Get out!" Hilary shouted. Her voice was thin and reedy with dryness.

Aki fell against the doorway as Gunnarson and Ken made their escape. She looked terrible, dried out.

Hilary grabbed her and helped the small woman out and up the tunnel. Aki's body became limper and her movements weaker as Hilary tried to keep her conscious. By the time they both collapsed onto the ground outside the cave, Aki had stopped breathing.

They all crowded round. Hilary felt as though most of her strength had gone and she tried to push them away.

"Miriam! Get Miriam!" She said.

She listlessly slapped at the dead girl's face to revive her, knowing that it was already too late.

"Get Doctor Vincent some water! She's barely conscious!" It sounded like Gunnarson was shouting.

Almost as though waiting for his cue, David rushed up to Hilary with a bottle of water and placed on her lips. The water felt so good.

"The Thing that Thirsts," she said.

"The what? What happened down there, Hilary?" David asked.

"Is there water still down there?"

"I-I don't know."

Hilary grabbed the bottle of water from David, pushed him aside and stood – as weak as she was all of this was done with great difficulty.

“Gunnarson! Are there still bottles of water down there?” she said.

Gunnarson gave her a blank stare.

“The water! Gunnarson! The water!” She said.

“I think so,” he said.

“I hope they aren’t open.”

The sound that came from the cave then was unlike anything she had heard before. Her ears hurt with the force of it.

She looked at Gunnarson and saw that the big man was as terrified as she was.

“We can’t go down and find out,” she said.

“Why not?” said David. He looked as confused as everyone else.

“Oh my god!” Said Miriam. She rushed up to the inert body of Aki. “How did this happen?”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Hilary. “We have to get the hell out of here.”

“Aki needs...”

“Aki’s dead and there’s nothing we can do for her!”

Before Miriam could answer there was that impossible roar again. Hilary hoped she was imagining it, but it sounded like it was getting closer.

“What the hell was that?” Miriam said.

“Something we have to get away from as quickly as possible,” Hilary said and pulled on Miriam’s shoulder.

Miriam turned on her with a venomous scowl and said, "This is because you broke into that fucking chamber! What have you let out, Hilary?"

Another roar, and this time it was even closer, stopped Hilary's answer.

"What is that infernal noise?" said Rutherford as he marched up.

He was the last person they needed on the scene.

"Get out of here, Rutherford! We have to get away!" Hilary said.

Too late. Someone closer to the cave mouth screamed.

Hilary turned to see torch beams play over the thing's slimy grey skin. Its eyes glowed of their own accord. It had at least twelve long, lean limbs, all ending with scything claws.

One of the torch beams dropped and she saw the owner of the torch collapse.

In that moment she knew it was too late for them all. It was impossible to run from this thing now. She could feel herself weakening even as she and those furthest away began to run. It was hopeless and soon 'The Thing that Thirsts' would drain them dry and go in search of more water. Its thirst had gone unquenched for three thousand years.

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